MYSTICAL MOTHERHOOD: BLENDING ECSTATIC RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN APPALACHIAN FICTION

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Appalachia is a region steeped in religious tradition. Religious discourse permeates the way Appalachians think and speak and the stories they tell; for many, it shapes their sense of Self within their families and culture, influencing their understanding of what it means to be moral, functioning members of society. Furthermore, religious discourse is often used as a rhetorical tool to help problematize specific political and cultural practices within Appalachian communities. It is not surprising, then, that author Bobbie Ann Mason weaves ecstatic and mystical religious experiences into her work as she addresses the concept of gender roles in Appalachian society. Mason’s novel *Feather Crowns* highlights ecstatic religious experience in its depiction of how ecstatic religious experiences and mountain faith structures can be exploited to keep women defined by rigidly-determined gender roles.

How does Mason craft ecstatic religious experience in ways that emphasize its double-edged nature as both a reification of women’s entrapment within gender norms and a tool that allows individual women’s defiance of specific gendered expectations? Furthermore, how do these works frame women’s sense of Self within their communities? How do they call into question long-held cultural stereotypes concerning Appalachia and its citizens. I utilize research into gender identity, feminism, and the positive and negative aspects of ecstatic religious experience in order to answer questions. As I demonstrate by doing a close reading of the works of Louis Althusser, Amy Hollywood, George Bataille, and Bobbie Ann Mason, literary depictions of ecstatic religious experience in Appalachia can be used to make palpable and question the religious and familial ideologies concerning women’s gendered position in society.
Mason’s work, in particular, brings into dramatic light the pain, frustration, and helplessness felt by women whose ecstatic religious experience comes into conflict with familial and/or social expectations.
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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2002, the halftime show for The Continental Tire Bowl included the University of Virginia’s pep band’s portrayal of a West Virginia University female student with “blacked out teeth…pigtailed, overalls, bare feet, and a talent for sexually suggestive square dancing…a female freak, with the presumption to lust after someone out of her class, the audacity to step outside properly assigned gender role to fight with her fists, and the willful ignorance to believe herself beautiful” (Engelhardt, “Creating…” 2, 3). Of course, these “properly assigned gender roles” are those of active and passive, and the class hierarchy is clear; what is most ruffling to the feathers of this commentator is the way that a female from Appalachia is seen as automatically freakish. The offensive skit—which was touted by the media as a Beverly Hillbillies version of The Bachelor—provided a clear example of how Appalachian women are often depicted by the media. As Denise Engelhardt states in her book Beyond Hill and Hollow, this brief moment created a space in which “race, class, gender, and Appalachia were enacted all at once, and the female mountain character danced out there at the edges of our consciousness” (“Creating…” 3). The mountain woman in the skit was representative of the nation’s vision of the poor, white, masculine, sexually promiscuous Appalachian female. As such, the skit inspired great anger from Appalachians across several states (including those located in parts of Virginia) and prompted the governor of West Virginia to demand an apology from UVA.¹

Apologies, though, do little good to rectify the emotional violence inflicted upon West Virginians who just wanted to watch a football game; neither do these apologies calm the

resentment of Appalachian women who saw the image and realized that they were once again being lampooned in front of a national audience. Furthermore, UVA’s apologies mean relatively little when similar representations of the stereotypical Appalachian dominate dozens of media outlets. Professor of history David Hsiung notes that an entire 1999 *New York Times Magazine* crossword puzzle—titled “Hillbilly Style”—was made up of clues emphasizing stereotypical Appalachian practices and answers that were distorted appropriations of Appalachian dialects (100). CBS’s *Forty-eight Hours* has also shown a tendency toward stereotyping, depicting Floyd County, Kentucky residents as being “‘tied to a place that seems like something out of another country’” and having “‘a life most Americans will never experience’” (Hsiung 102). Historian Richard Straw was shocked and confused during his undergraduate education when he approached an Ohio University professor about the possibilities of offering course on the history of Appalachia only to be informed that Appalachia has no history (Straw 1). Poet Frank X. Walker coined the term “Affrilachian” in 1991 when he read *Webster’s Dictionary’s* definition of Appalachians as being white and realized that as an African American, Appalachian, he did not exist (Douglas). Gay and lesbian voices from Appalachia, meanwhile, are ignored or else reconfigured as southern or national voices; the non-heterosexual does not fit American media’s portrayal of the homophobic Appalachian. Similarly, Appalachians with moderate, progressive, or non-Christian religious identities are thought not to exist.

From the 2002 football game to a longer history of language found in the archives of Appalachian lore, mainstream American society constantly creates and reinforces essentialist depictions that are not only inaccurate but are also offensive and emotionally damaging to many people within the region. Branded as poor, white, unintelligent, gender-segregated, religiously conservative mountainfolk existing in complete isolation, Appalachians are often forced to
validate the preconceived notion that they live in a socially backward land that time forgot. Furthermore, the idea that the region has no past—and yet remains stuck in an imaginary view of the nation’s past—denies any changes or developments concerning belief systems or social justice issues that have taken place in the region. Appalachians are seen as static characters within the great novel that is America, existing without a past or a future to call their own. They are branded as poor, white, unintelligent, gender-segregated, religiously conservative mountaineers existing in isolation and violently curtailing any outside efforts to bring their political or social structure into the 21st century. They are deemed as living lives that are antithetical to American values. This tendency to depict Appalachians as existing in a realm that exists outside of the rest of the United States is troubling for those who do not measure up—or down, as the case may be—to the image of the hillbilly. If progressives, non-heterosexuals, and nonwhites cannot exist as a part of American society because they are from Appalachia, and they cannot exist in Appalachia because they are minorities not associated with the region, then where can they exist?

It would be impossible for one person or text to question and resolve long-held stereotypes in every previously mentioned category. It will take a host of researchers and activists with a variety of interests in order to cause a major shift in public perceptions of Appalachian identity. A plethora of Appalachians have begun to be brought into the public forum through the narratives of many leading authors, and these people are now demanding to be recognized and validated. For instance, writers like Stephen L. Fisher, Stephen William Foster, 

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2 Foundational to this view of the way that national narratives are constructed is Perry Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson claims that the state reconstructs monuments, sponsors print editions of traditional literary texts, crafts educational policies, etc. in order to construct a national narrative in which socially or economically exploited segments of the population are viewed as having “always been, or have long become, incapable of either greatness or self-rule” (Anderson 181). While Anderson mainly focuses of colonial efforts in Asia and Africa, his theories have relevant applications in America’s economically depressed regions that are deemed socially and culturally inferior by the majority of the nation.
and Chris Weiss are exploring the benefits and challenges facing grassroots organization as Appalachians struggle to demand social and economic liberty and fight for environmental concerns. Frank X. Walker, Crystal Wilkinson, and other self-identified Affrilachians are openly inviting discussions of racial and ethnic identity, even as Virginia Seitz and Betty Parker Duff are exploring the relationship between gender and class formation among working Appalachian women. Meanwhile, a host of historians are going to great lengths to rediscover Appalachia’s history, relating it to America’s national history.

In a slightly different, but also necessarily Appalachian segment of writing, the question of religion among Appalachian women has recently become a main point of interest for sociologists and literary scholars as well as theological leaders. Although this present thesis is the first to make these connections public, it is doing so by joining a group of literary writers and theologists who are concerned with these social, cultural, and theological issues. Religious critics and sociologists like Heather Ackley Bean and Deborah Vansau McCauley are exploring

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3 Examples of Fischer’s, Foster’s, and Weiss’s writings on grassroots organization efforts are found in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, published by Temple University Press. As senior associate with the Economic Development Program and recipient of a fellowship from the Kellogg International Leadership Program, Weiss is of special interest. Both her activism and her writing focus on women and rural economic development in Appalachia (Fisher 365).


5 The author of the comprehensive study *Women, Development, and Communities for Empowerment in Appalachia*, Virginia Rinaldo Seitz is quoted and paraphrased extensively by Ackley Bean and other Appalachian feminist scholars. I refer to this groundbreaking book multiple times throughout this project.

6 Originally from Harlan County, Kentucky, Duff received her Ph.D. from the University of Maine (Engelhardt, “Contributors” 251). Her essay “Stand by Your Man: Gender and Class formation in the Harlan County Coalfields” can be found in *Beyond Hill and Hollow: Original Readings in Appalachian Women’s Studies*, edited by Elizabeth Engelhardt and published by The Ohio University Press.

7 A compilation of essays spanning topics ranging from the effects of industrialization and the Great Depression to important religious, musical, and literary influences in the region, *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place* is devoted to recovering and analyzing Appalachia’s history as well as documenting its current conditions.
the formation and importance of religious identity in both urban and rural Appalachians. In an effort to tie these and other branches of inquiry together, concerned citizens created the Appalachian Studies Association in 1977, creating a safe academic environment in which people can discuss issues ranging from environmental concerns and economic empowerment to folk art and literature (“Appalachian Studies…”). Thanks to these efforts, a plethora of people are stepping to the forefront and challenging the discursive tools used to frame conversations concerning Appalachian identity.

What has not been explored in any scholarly work to date are the ways in which gender identity and religious identity coalesce within Appalachian fiction. While gender, religion, and fictitious accounts concerning Appalachian identity are each being looked at as separate pieces of a grander puzzle, the possible links between these pieces have not been established. This gap in literary and social criticism needs to be addressed and rectified because issues concerning gender and sexuality are highly contentious subjects for both Appalachians and the nation at large. Furthermore, as the Marxist-psychoanalytical cultural critic Louis Althusser explains, religion is a major Ideological State Apparatus that affects how individuals and groups function within their society (143). Since Appalachia is a region steeped in religious tradition, religious discourse permeates the way Appalachians think and speak and helps shape their sense of self within society. Indeed, research shows that Appalachian “churches function as a source for positive connection with Appalachian identity, culture, and traditions even when those are implicit rather than consciously recognized by the individual Appalachian worshiper” (Ackley Bean 80). As an ISA that still holds major sway throughout Appalachia, religious identity (thus the discourse emerging from it) becomes a major rhetorical tool for both discussing and policing non-normative gender identities and lifestyles. Religious ideology and/or dogma is often used to
create and reify specific gender norms; to explain the gendered position of people within the family unit; to allow for the defiance of gender norms within specific religious or secular contexts; and to establish alternative sets of gender norms once a person is deemed to exist outside typical gender constraints. In short, religious identity influences people’s understanding of what it means to be healthy, moral, family-oriented individuals. Therefore, neither an Appalachian studies critique concerning gender categories, nor one concerning religious identity, can be complete unless it acknowledges how these two categories often influence each other; this is one of the main assertions of the present thesis.

Furthermore, recent research by sociologists leads to the conclusion that a much larger number of Appalachians are spiritually active than has been conventionally reported. Deborah McCauley notes that due to the fact that many rural Appalachian churches (including Pentecostal and Primitive Baptist churches) are members of loose confederations instead of nationally recognized denominations, they are categorized as sects, and census-takers record their members as being among the unchurched (181). Evidence of the large discrepancy between the number of Appalachians officially categorized as religious and those who consider themselves religious can be seen by comparing the findings of the North American Religion Atlas (NARA)—which uses membership numbers in nationally recognized denominations—and the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)—which bases its statistics on self-identification. In a survey of West Virginia alone (the only state to exist entirely within Appalachia), NARA recorded that a staggering 60% of the population was unchurched, while ARIS reported that only 13% of the population had no religious affiliation (Hill 151). These competing studies indicate that even though an individual may hold no connection to a nationally-recognized faith tradition, he/she may still have a strong religious identity and agree with a particular faith’s standards of moral
gender norms. These norms and expectations work their way into a person’s and/or family’s speech patterns, perpetuating organized religion’s position as an ideological state apparatus and merging with preconceived notions concerning traditional gender roles within the family and community.

The merger between gender identity and religious identity described above is often woven into the fictitious narrative accounts of Appalachian authors whose work includes characters defying gender expectations or struggling with their identities. Since social scientists and activists first began focusing on Appalachia in their studies, they have noted a discomfort among people asked to articulate or argue for their social constructs or personal ideals. While some authors have interpreted this discomfort as representative of a general hostility toward change, Ackley Bean argues that it actually arises from conflicting discursive strategies. Appalachians privilege social and ethical claims that are, “embedded in narrative whenever stories praise or criticize certain actions and envision how things should be or might become” (Bean 36). To Bean, it is the “collective aspect of narrative” (37) that becomes the privileged site for interpreting experiences. Bean is not alone in this claim; other critics have noted that Appalachian authors tend to use seemingly simple narrative structures and a level of linguistic and emotional directness to reflect the concerns of Appalachian people (Olson 172,174). If Appalachians are consistently using narrative structures as the privileged way to discuss identity politics, then it is fitting that a critical analysis of these concerns also focus on narrative literature.

Since there is no precedent for work of this kind, it is helpful to look at other groundbreaking discourses that have found their position from the experience of cultural groups. For example, in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith explains that because there
has not been a language or narrative for black women writers to assert their voice, it is necessary to create a new narrative and discourse. Smith postulates, “Thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually, Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (2307). Although Smith is addressing the Black woman writer, her belief that such writers are directly influenced by their shared political and social experiences in such a way that they manifest a common approach to literature has strong implications for Appalachian authors who often share common religious, social, and political experiences. Therefore, authors with common experiences concerning religious identity and gender norms constitute an identifiable literary tradition that helps explore—through both fiction and nonfiction—the discourse taking shape concerning gender and religion within Appalachian society.

Gender issues are just as confusing and daunting to Appalachians as they are to any member of society. For a variety of reasons, some Appalachians still believe in adhering to rigid gender categories in which men and women continue to occupy separate spheres. This belief in the need to uphold strict gender distinctions can be explained, in part, by Smith’s assertion that when “heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that [some] women have. None of us have…sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege; maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort” (2313). For some women who, as Appalachians, occupy the distinct position of

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8 Barbara Smith credits fiction as being a major resource for acknowledging and exploring the relationships between different identity categories. After envisioning and outlining a systematic approach to literature that would be used by what she calls the “Black Feminist Critic,” Smith uses this new approach to do a close reading of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in a way that acknowledges how sexual and racial concerns interplay with and influence each other throughout the book. My approach to literature is indebted to Smith’s methodology. My privileging of literature and belief that sexual politics and religious and class concerns make Appalachian fiction concerning gender identity an identifiable literary tradition mirrors Smith’s belief that sexual and racial politics help make Black women’s writing its own literary tradition. In attempting to define an Appalachian gender studies critical discourse, I focus on the relationship between gender and religion rather than the relationship between race and sexuality.
being second-class citizens in relation to both the rest of the nation and patriarchal society, protecting their status as religiously pure wives and mothers becomes of utmost importance. For such people (who often come from strict faiths and/or families with clear gender distinctions), fitting into traditional gendered roles within both the family and society is one of the few ways to demonstrate that they are moral, upstanding citizens who share a sense of privilege with others like them.

On the other side of the spectrum, some Appalachians openly challenge conventional gender norms by dressing in drag, outing themselves as being transgender, or passionately calling for equal rights regardless of gender identification. Often, these individuals find themselves either unwilling or unable to fit into traditional or conservative gendered roles. Asserting their identity as different from (and in many cases in direct opposition to) heteronormative patriarchal society is often considered a matter of life and death for such people. Often, individuals within this group violently reject their religious and/or familial upbringing and (in many cases) decide to leave the region entirely. A large number of Appalachians, meanwhile, fall somewhere in between the two polarities represented by extreme religious conservative and extreme nonconformists; members of this ‘middle’ group may advocate equal rights for men and women but find themselves extremely uncomfortable when they come into contact with openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people. For such individuals,

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9 Although some crucial work has been done with regard to class and gender in Appalachia (most notably, see Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg), the main focus of gender studies has not taken into account the way that class and religion intersect in the Appalachian region.

10 Michael Warner documents this phenomenon on a national scale in The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life. Warner postulates that many people within the LGBTQ community attempt to conform to gender expectations and sexual norms in order to escape social stigma (43). Other relevant sources on this topic include Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, Judith Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, and Eve Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet.
fictional accounts of gender-nonconformity provide a safe place for them to examine their beliefs and question the use of strict gender codes within their churches, families, and communities. Thus, while mainstream society defines Appalachia as an always-already subaltern space in which only strictly-gendered representations of heterosexuality and religious identity are allowed, Appalachian fiction provides a place where both authors and readers can give voice to their concerns and disagreements in these areas. Fiction, then, provides a way to destabilize Appalachian citizens’ subaltern position in regards to the rest of American society and gives them a chance to speak for themselves.

Methodology

“Mystical Motherhood…” focuses on at what is geographically considered Central Appalachia. While Central Appalachia can also be considered a rather subjective category, it is generally thought to consist of the entire state of West Virginia and portions of southern Ohio, eastern Kentucky, northern Tennessee and western Virginia (“Subregions…”). Since Central Appalachia covers a much more compact region, its people share more cultural and religious similarities than one would find within the entire Appalachian mountain range. Central Appalachia is also the geographic region that many outsiders think of when they encounter references to Appalachia, making it the region which is most affected by stereotypes. Furthermore, its greater level of geographic isolation and specific socio-economic markers such as its higher poverty rates\(^\text{11}\) make Central Appalachia a hotbed of activity for research pertaining to issues of regional and cultural identity formation.

\(^{11}\) In its 2009 annual income report, the Appalachian Regional Commission documented that per capita personal income in Central Appalachia was 71% and of the national per capita market income as opposed to Appalachia as a whole’s 80% average (1).
Even within Central Appalachia, many religious constructs and activities contribute to the formation of gender identity. This production of gender in its relation to religion has not yet been addressed in studies of class and Appalachian social groups, and it may help people to find these questions articulated in literary scholarship so that they may then read literary and other cultural media with a stronger sense of personal identity. This history is one that has not yet been told. It is the goal of this thesis to give voice to one of the subaltern categories that remain within the United States. However, starting a narrative is never easy. As Barbara Smith noted about sexuality and race in her “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” while a huge spectrum of ideas, themes, and literature concerning gender and religion in Appalachian fiction needs to be explored, there are simply too many religious factors to be worked into a single document. Therefore, as Smith chose to begin with only a couple themes found within one piece of literature as a way of beginning to “examine everything that [we] have ever thought and believed about feminist culture” (2315), I have decided to focus on the theme of ecstatic religious experience. Some people are atheists or agnostics, others are aligned with very structured and acknowledged faith traditions, and still others are members of religious groups that defy methods of typical religious categorization. Thus, the question becomes: how does one contemplate issues like religious identity within a region that is consistently entering into religious discourse but that is doing so from a variety of theological perspectives? The scope must be further narrowed to a point that both weeds out some differentiation but is still inclusive of a sizable number of people/identities. In order to further narrow the parameters of this project, “Mystical Mothers…” focuses on a particular religious experience that is found within several mountain

12 (Smith 2315)
faith traditions and that often works its way into discourse between those with a variety of
different backgrounds: the experience of religious ecstasy.

References to instances of religious ecstasy can be found within a diverse set of
Appalachian faith traditions. Depending on the context and faith tradition, Appalachian
experiences of religious ecstasy can be referred to as the confirmation of a sweet hope in the
breast, a mountaintop or salvation experience, a Damascus road moment, a gift of the Holy
Spirit, etc. Indeed, as Ackley Bean notes, Appalachian faith traditions generally involve a
theodicy that blends ordinary and extraordinary personal experiences into a framework that
creates a metaphysical foundation for the types of connections forged between different people,
their thoughts, and their actions. This structure becomes a type of process theology that is
specific to Appalachians (Bean 13).

At a basic level, moments of religious ecstasy are interpreted to originate from God;
therefore, they are enacted upon the individual having the ecstatic experience with or without
his/her consent. Such ecstatic moments are highly likely to be found within large Appalachian
faith traditions like the Primitive Baptist and the Holiness Pentecostal movements. However,
such moments also find homes within Appalachian versions of Catholic and mainline Protestant
movements with a startling frequency (Bean 13). These experiences are also accompanied by
tales of how they changed the lives or forever influenced the identities of the people who have
them. Thus, they are often incorporated into the construction of an individual’s identity and have
the power to influence other identity-markers. This special type of theodicy within Appalachia
has caused a number of social scientists as well as cultural and religious studies experts to take
an interest in the region. Thus, the works of people like Samuel Hill (who problematizes the
stereotype that Appalachians hold a strict adherence to the belief in a vengeful God), Virginia
Seitz (who analyzes how religious traditions can shape social identity in ways that both help and hinder the feminist causes), and the aforementioned Heather Ackley Bean (who explores the connection between narrative structures and theodicy in urban Appalachian women) are extremely important resources to consider. Meanwhile, members of individual faith traditions are also speaking from the perspective of the insider, using tools like the Internet to explain the self-identified doctrines and dogmas of little-studied *hyphenate* religious groups like the Primitive Baptists and the Holiness Pentecostals. While such self-identifications must be scrutinized carefully, they also provide a valuable insight into the ways that religious belief plays out in the identity formation of Appalachian individuals.

Not only does ecstatic religious experience find a home in Appalachia; it also an issue that has been taken up by literary criticism as a means of understanding the experience of people who encounter the limits of knowledge. In this area of religious and cultural studies, the works of Georges Bataille and Amy Hollywood are of great importance. Bataille’s *Inner Experience*, in particular, becomes a major touchstone for an understanding of ecstasy as it outlines a system in which people can use ecstatic religious experience not to find a new truth but rather to affirm an inner desire or idea that they are perhaps afraid to claim as their own. In this way, Bataille illustrates how religious ecstasy can be a means of gaining power and producing identities that will allow marginalized people to find their voices. Therefore, through the study of Bataille I have found that within Appalachian fiction, religious ecstasy can be used as a tool to help characters identify and give voice to their discomfort concerning gender norms that they already feel discomfited by and/or unconsciously wish to escape. This appropriation of religious experience does not mean that characters are having an inauthentic or contrived moment of spiritual enlightenment; on the contrary, it helps to produce a view of their experience as
authentic and meritorious of recognition. In a different generation of scholars, Amy Hollywood—a professor at Harvard Divinity School who has written extensively on religious ecstasy and Bataille—has approached this question of religious ecstasy to illustrate how groups achieve identities across time. Particularly, Hollywood addresses the way that an individual experience has the potential to produce a discourse that is also socially potent. By way of the arguments about ecstasy put forth by Bataille and Hollywood, those experiencing religious ecstasy deeply believe that they have been touched by God and that they have been brought up in societies that privilege and attest to the existence of such encounters.

Bobbie Ann Mason becomes an important figure when one discusses issues pertaining to Appalachians, gender, and religion within Appalachian narrative structures. Mason has set works in Appalachia, dealt with themes surrounding Appalachian gender roles, and provided contextual clues—and sometimes even outright declarations—about the religious affiliations of their characters. These religious affiliations are often ones that both privilege ecstatic religious experience as a site of truth and fit into Bean’s notion of a distinctively Appalachian theodicy. Furthermore, Mason’s novel Feather Crowns features a heroine who is caught in a series of skirmishes between competing religious, gender, and familial structures. The character’s attempted negotiation of these conflicts through her reactions to ecstatic religious experiences provides a complex and ultimately troubling take on how religious identity can both support and suppress gender non-conformity. Essentially, Feather Crowns enters into a discourse in which readers ask themselves how religious affiliation and expectations manifest themselves upon the female body and her place within the family. Thus, the novel becomes an effective narrative account through which one can discuss the relationship between ecstasy and religious, cultural, and gendered identity.
This work is devoted to exploring the effects of religious identity and ecstatic religious experiences in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *Feather Crowns*. Through my reading I have developed a view of Mason’s literary structure that places the protagonist within specific social and faith systems, contextualizes the beliefs inherent in these systems, and then explains how moments of religious ecstasy are used to both free the heroine from specific gender constraints as well as to inscribe a new set of constraints upon her person. The heroine, then, is caught in a realm of shifting identity categories and expectations. Thus, each chapter in this thesis explores the various implications for women caught within this system and demonstrates that religious ecstasy is a double-edged sword that can wound even as it defends individuals.

Chapter 1 is a brief inquiry as to how religious discourse in general and ecstatic religious discourse enhances feminism’s ability to challenge gender constructs within Appalachian culture. As I will synthesize between the works of Louis Althusser, Georges Bataille, Amy Hollywood, Elizabeth Engelhardt, and feminist theologian Heather Ann Ackley Bean to prove, utilizing religious rhetorical strategies provides a way for feminism to work to subvert some of the stereotypes and quarrels some Appalachians have against feminist discourse. At the same time, feminist discourse helps to challenge some of the harmful effects of religion as an ideological state apparatus advocating strict gender roles within Appalachian communities. Working together, then, religious and feminist discourse can help challenge patriarchal social practices in a productive manner.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to Mason’s work in *Feather Crowns*; they read the heroine Christianna as a Primitive Baptist who has been influenced by evangelical and Pentecostal teachings. Her ecstatic religious experience and its accompanying miraculous events at first mark her as separate from other women; but these experiences eventually are folded back into
her community’s, family’s, and church’s accepted modes of discourse in order to reinscribe her position as woman. These chapters break apart how religious ecstasy (which supposedly creates a new life/understanding within a person) can actually be used to reinforce pre-existing gender norms or serve the purposes of the community as opposed to the needs of the individual. Thus, I will argue, Mason’s novel highlights the inherently violent and damaging ways ecstatic religious experiences can be used to reify individual women’s gendered roles within both the family and society, violently foreclosing attempts to assert one’s non-comformity and still retain a respectable position as a worthy member of the church, family, or community.

The conclusion of this work will draw upon overarching themes concerning gender identity and religious ecstasy within the novel, proving that within Appalachia, gender and religious identity interact with each other in ways that cannot be ignored. I also explore the questions of what these depictions of Appalachian identity constructs mean for Appalachians as well as for people living in various regions throughout the United States. It may well be that Appalachian narratives can help our society as a whole to rethink the way it envisions and discusses identity in general. As such, I will argue that what were once thought to be “backward” Appalachian people may offer the discursive tools necessary to help reshape America’s cultural and political climate.
CHAPTER I. WHY COMBINE FEMINIST AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE?

It is nearly impossible to discuss complex issues relating to prevailing social structure like gender and religion without accounting for the influence of ideology on identity and daily life. Michael Moriarty—a professor at Queen Mary University of London—believes that analyzing ideology is particularly useful within the context of literary criticism, “precisely because of its vagueness, or flexibility: its capacity to unite, through the medium of discourse, on the one hand abstract ideas, although viewed less as abstract notions than as concrete particular positions, constructed more around images than around concepts, and on the other actual social behaviour [sic]” (54). It should come as no surprise, then, that recent work in race studies, feminist criticism, post-colonialism, and gender studies have utilized and expanded on Louis Althusser’s theories concerning Ideological State Apparatuses in order to provide critical analyses of a number of topics related to hierarchal and/or hegemonic social systems (Moriarty 53-54).

In 1969, Althusser published his influential work “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation).” Moriarty claims that Althusser’s definition of ideology can best be described as “the foundation of all beliefs and all non-scientific ideas in general…the sphere in which I ‘live’ or experience my relationship to those conditions, it is my imaginary relationship to them—a relationship that expresses social or political will” (44). By creating an imaginary relationship with social conditions, ideology has the potential to shape not only how subjects view the world around them, but also how they act in relation to the social and cultural stimuli. Althusser postulates that the reproduction of the dominant social order relies in large part on “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer
in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” which he terms Ideological State Apparatuses (143). Althusser lists seven major apparatuses: religion, education, the family, the legal system, the political system, trade unions, the media, and cultural influences like literature, art, and sports (143). While each ISA functions differently, it works in tandem with others in order to guarantee the conservation of State power and provide for, “the reproduction of the skills of labor power” (Althusser 133, emphasis in original). Since these apparatuses infiltrate every part of public and private life from the moment a person is born until he/she dies, the values upheld by each ISA shape the values and concerns of both individuals and society as a whole. Therefore, the family, the education system, etc. are utilized to reproduce the individual ideologies needed to safeguard the existing social order and preserve the status quo for future generations.

Even though ISAs are generally linked to the private sphere, they also have a public, repressive function. Althusser explains:

Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.) Thus Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc. to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family…The same is true of the cultural IS Apparatuses (censorship, among other things), etc. (145)

While structures like religion and the family unit function predominantly as a way to inculcate individuals with an ideological adherence to the perceptions and goals of the dominant social system and its ruling class, clear repressive consequences are put in place for those who
challenge state-sanctioned ideology. This dual role of being both Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses leads structures like the family and the church to hold a tremendous amount of power over the citizens bound to them. The threat of being disowned, excommunicated, expelled, or otherwise punished leads individuals who may question the hierarchies and values of the dominant social system to continue following its mandates. Since ISA’s function to help create and sustain dominant ideology while at the same time ferreting out and disciplining those who attempt to break away from it, they perpetuate a cycle in which people have no choice but to fall in line with the dictates of the dominant social order.

An underlying discourse concerning the nature of religion can be found within Althusser’s analysis of ISA’s. Due to Althusser’s perception that for most of modern history, the Church has served as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus and subsumed other apparatuses beneath it, the effect of religion on the ideologies of gender and the family is of particular importance (Althusser 151). As the formerly central ISA to society, The Church continues to wield a great deal of ideological clout in communities that privilege organized religion. Indeed, the religious apparatus still uses the rhetorical strategies found in “sermons and the other great ceremonies of Birth, Marriage and Death” to help guarantee to the “reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (Althusser 154). Since rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death are intrinsically linked to the family unit, the Church plays a vital role in the continued reproduction of strictly-gendered perceptions of the family. Furthermore, the Church—like other ISAs—teaches “‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ‘practice’” (Althusser 133, emphasis in original). If indeed the Church continues to edify congregants in such a way that they believe they must bow down before the ruling ideology of the state in order to preserve their position in
both society and the eyes of God, then it becomes an influential force in preserving a variety of social standards including but not limited to gender norms.

How, then, should one approach the tricky topic of the church as an ISA influencing gender norms in Appalachian fiction? When considering this question, it is helpful to address the way that other discourses that concern women and their rights have developed under these ideological apparatuses. For instance, although it is a separate line of inquiry, feminist discourse is also directly related to the ISAs of the Church, the Family, and Education. Because women have largely been responsible for these domestic realms, they also have become icons of places where women have the potential to attain power. However, because they are also ideological apparatuses, the apparent freedom that women attain within these structures is also tethered to the more traditionally male apparatuses like the Military and the State. In the case of Appalachia, these relationships are even more complex, as men dominate the Church, and often have significant control over the Family structures.

Feminist discourse is often used in an attempt to unravel the complexities surrounding gendered identity within Appalachian families and communities, resulting in some important findings and theories. The work of people like Virginia Seitz and Elizabeth Engelhardt has contributed immensely to the field of Appalachian studies. There are, however, several obstacles that arise when one attempts to utilize a feminist approach to Appalachian culture and fiction. The first obstacle is that while feminism has, as Engelhardt puts it, “a long history of self reflection and interrogations of its own classist and racist assumptions,” it is often depicted as being “for middle-class, white women only” (“Creating…” 12). This misperception of feminism provides a serious stumbling block in a geographic area that has historically held disproportionate poverty rates in comparison to the rest of the United States. Based on numbers
provided by the 2000 US Census, the Appalachian Regional Commission claims that Central Appalachia’s—portions of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia—poverty rate is over double the US average rate (Lichter 11). These statistics, along with a conglomeration of economic and social disparities, has led researchers like Seitz to conclude that “grassroots mobilization in the marginalized areas of the United States [like Appalachia] may have more in common with the 3rd world rather than middle-class North American agendas” (12). For working-class Appalachians living below the poverty line, then, the perception that feminism is equated with middle-class agendas causes them to doubt the validity or importance of feminist aims or critiques of their ways of life. Therefore, many Appalachians either distrust feminism as a tool of the oppressive upper class or assume that feminist goals and rhetoric simply do not apply to them.

Another stumbling block for the feminist movement within Appalachia is that many Appalachians retain a keen interest in personal living and preserving their traditional ways of life. As a culture, rural Appalachians are often more concerned about their individual lives and their small communities than they are about state or national causes (Hill 143). In the political arena, this concern manifests as a desire, “to maintain the existing social order, holding on to the incumbent leaders and values. Its public life does not fall into either the ‘moralistic political culture’ seeking to enlist public interest or empathizing citizen participation or into ‘individualistic political culture’ with its multiplicity of views” (Hill 144). Simply put, many rural Appalachians—particularly those within conservative and/or ecstatic religious movements—do not “set out to transform the world, either society or the church. Instead godly animation is meant to lead to congregational, community, family, and personal integrity of behavior and to acceptance of others with respect to the absence of a judgmental spirit” (146).
The feminist movement, meanwhile, has a ‘historical and continuing commitment to politicized scholarship meant to change the nation and the world’ (Engelhardt, “Creating…” 7). The overtly political nature of feminism as well as many feminists’ stated desire to make sweeping social changes can be extremely off-putting and frightening to people who distrust large-scale social movements and national politics. Far from acknowledging the common interests between mountain women and feminist causes—ending physical abuse and demanding equal pay for equal work would be two examples of their similar goals—many Appalachians assume that feminists wish to dismantle and destroy their families, communities, and way of life. Therefore, many Appalachians react with fear, anger, and hostility when engaging with an overtly feminist rhetoric.

Religious discourse in general and discourse surrounding ecstatic religious experiences in particular can help bridge the gulf between Appalachian concerns and feminist discourse in order to help achieve feminism’s goals in the region. In contrast to feminism, religious ecstasy is viewed by many Appalachians as belonging to every class—particularly to the underprivileged. According to Seitz, the church and the religious experiences found within it become “the source of affirmation for people who are not affirmed in their jobs or in their interactions with other institutions in the public sphere” (123). It is within the church and its practices, then, that many working-class Appalachians find empowerment and envision themselves as being on equal footing with the middle and upper classes of society. They believe that in the eyes of God, wealth or social status does not matter. Since religious ecstasy is seen as being an individual experience sent by God and remaining unfettered by class constraints, Appalachian readers and writers may demonstrate less discomfort and distrust when approaching questions of gender and
identity through a discourse that deals explicitly with queer ecstatic experience than an overtly feminist discourse.

Furthermore, while feminism is perceived as a threat to the existing social order, religion is seen as a way to perfect both the individuals and the local community while still maintaining the basic, traditional social order. In contrast to negative cultural stereotypes surrounding feminism, the Church is seen as a preserver of the community as it “intends to be” or ought to be (Hill 144). Therefore, women’s commitment to specific causes or groups tends to be framed in, “spiritual language that evoke[s] sympathy rather than [social] justice as the basis for action” (Seitz 35). This rhetorical framework that relies on spirituality provides both activists and authors with a way to question specific cultural norms and practices without seeming to attack the community as a whole. Therefore, Appalachian readers are more likely to be open to religious discourse than they will be to a more overtly social justice-oriented feminist discourse that they believe wants to destroy their very way of life.

Queer or ecstatic religious discourse surrounding gender, in particular, carries great weight with community members that are already accustomed to discussing, reading about, witnessing, and even experiencing religious ecstasy themselves. In Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, Judith Butler expands on Althusser’s notion that one is entered into the ‘ritual’ of ideology regardless of whether there is a prior and authenticating belief in that ideology” (24). In explaining her reading of Althusserian interpellation, she writes, “to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible” (Butler 5). Thus, for Butler, language is able to sustain “the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of
the body first becomes possible” (5). Specific discourses and ideologies, then, can serve to sustain, threaten, or even harm a subject by interpelling and hailing him/her in a number of different ways that may either correspond to or conflict with prevailing social norms.

Meanwhile, the discursive practices of people in the twentieth century have betrayed a modern fascination with mystical and ecstatic worship that Amy Hollywood believes is indicative of a, “desire to come to terms with suffering and death…[and] a nostalgia for a time when there were ritual means to deal with the traumatic effects of loss, limitation, and death” (20). Since multiple Appalachian faith structures privilege ecstatic experience as a way of accessing truth, discourse surrounding religious ecstasy can be used as a rhetorical tool that recognizes the existence of non-normative gender expressions as well as to challenge long-held social norms. Georges Bataille writes that within ecstatic religious experience, God is tied to the salvation of the soul—at the same time as to the other relations of the imperfect to the perfect” (4) [emphasis in the original]. Within this system, the perfection and “salvation of the soul” is always-already tied to the perfection and salvation of other worldly concerns and/or social systems. Ecstatic religious discourse within Appalachia is often in agreement with Bataille on this matter. Ackley Bean explains that Appalachians often believe that “through grace, God initiates religious feelings in human beings, and human beings cooperate, empowering God to work in their lives as God empowers them to act, to love, and to be vulnerable…the spirit ‘lays on’ one’s heart the intuitions of the divine will,” making deep listening the “principle avenue of religious knowledge” (158). Hill, meanwhile, refers to Appalachian religious discourse as centered upon articulating one’s individual experience of God through a personal, “down to earth” understanding of the Christian message demanding that individuals constantly attempt to perfect themselves and live in piety while at the same time treating others’ weaknesses with
tolerance (145). Striving toward both individual piety and acceptance of others’ possible impiety challenges people to accept non-normative members of their community and can—over time—slowly influence and change cultural perceptions of morality, the family unit, or even society as a whole. It is God—not man—who is seen as the initiator and sustainer of these cultural shifts. Through the experiences and feelings God has laid upon the hearts of individuals, imperfect societies are slowly modified until they learn to accept and acknowledge a host of changes including but not limited to gender identity and the role of women within society.

In her book *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Amy Hollywood reads Bataille, Cixous, Irigary, de Beauvoir, and others in order to explore how religious mysticism becomes engendered. Hollywood explains that within the modern era, there has been a tendency to denigrate “forms of mysticism that seem hopelessly mired in emotions, eroticism, and the body” (13), Appalachian women often gain rhetorical and social strength through their emotional and bodily experiences of religious ecstasy. Indeed, Appalachian faith, while often patriarchal, “recognizes women’s influence; in fact, it helps generate that influence” (Hill 145). This influence is often generated and recognized through having and testifying about both ecstatic and non-ecstatic religious experiences. Ackely Bean explains,

Testifying—telling one’s religious story—is an important democratic tradition in Appalachian churches, providing a public forum for Appalachian women’s prophetic voices. As sociologist Troy Abell has demonstrated, the practice of testifying during worship is predominately a women’s tradition. Allowing women to not only participate in Appalachian cultus but to dominate it…Thus Appalachian women’s narratives, their own experiences of suffering and survival have already been used by Appalachian
women as a resource for theodicy—not just for themselves but for the church as a whole.

(26-27)

As a site that privileges women’s narrative accounts of their “suffering and survival,” Appalachian religious discourse provides a way for women to highlight the unfairness or problems within cultural mores or social customs without appearing to advocate for the destruction of society. This rhetorical practice can quickly move outside the church and become a valuable tool for female Appalachian authors exploring the status of women within both the family and the community. Much like Seitz’s activists who advocate for their causes using spiritual terms rather than social justice rhetoric, authors like Mason cause readers to rethink the role of women in Appalachian society by providing fictitious or biographic narrative accounts of women who have a life-altering ecstatic religious experience but still suffer under an oppressive familial or social structure.

The final (and troubling) way in which a strict feminist approach differs from an ecstatic religious feminist approach has to do with women’s perceived transcendence (or lack thereof) of gendered identity. Many feminists from Simone de Beauvoir to present-day theorists are highly invested in destroying what de Beauvoir termed the Myth of Woman. This myth assumes that women have an intrinsic nature based on their sex and denies, “against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being” (de Beauvoir 1407). While women who have ecstatic religious experiences are officially considered human beings, they are often still seen as being intrinsically different from their male counterparts. Indeed, Amy Hollywood views mysticism and ecstatic experiences as being a gendered field in which women are perceived as being more likely to have ecstatic experiences like visions and other sensations because they are “more porous and imaginative than men and, therefore, open to possession” (9). Hollywood further claims that if
one is to include de Beauvoir’s depiction of mysticism in *The Second Sex*, he or she will come to the conclusion that women who have had ecstatic experiences, “do not transcend the perceived nature of their sex in the mystical; rather the mystical is an extension of their gendered identity. Since women are deemed incapable of achieving transcendence except through men, in men’s absence they turn to the male God” (127). This reading of the gendered nature of religious ecstasy has a profound impact on any rhetoric that privileges queer or ecstatic religious experiences as a way of critiquing or questioning women’s role within society.

If women are assumed to remain immanent without a male God to provide them with ecstasy or a male member of the household to grant them authority and subjectivity, then women’s narrative accounts and ecstatic religious experiences can be easily appropriated to serve traditional, patriarchal society. Thus, even as utilizing ecstatic religious experience as a tool to challenge certain gender norms may hold a great deal of potential for Appalachian women, religious ecstasy also has the opportunity to actually reify women’s secondary, gendered position within the home and community. Women within Appalachia, then, can benefit from both using ecstatic religious experience as a rhetorical tool that enhances the perceived validity of feminist critiques of certain cultural norms and using feminist discourse to challenge some long-held notions concerning women’s immanence and gendered position within religious discourse and life.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Feather Crowns* engages Appalachian readers by both privileging female narrative accounts of ecstatic religious experiences and critiquing the possible outcomes of a complete reliance upon religious ecstasy as a source of liberation and affirmation for women. Set in rural Kentucky in 1900, and arranged as a narrative account in which religious discourse is used to chronicle a woman named Christie’s early married life, pregnancy with
quintuplets, and the aftermath of the children’s birth and eventual deaths, Feather Crowns has been credited for “explore[ing] social changes and the inescapable power of memory” (McCorkle). Christie’s story touches upon several feminist concerns including women’s gendered position within the family unit, social and economic role as second-class citizens within society, and assumed immature, child-like role within the Church. Indeed, some of the scenes within the novel—such as when Christie is forced to sit and sew beside a glass case full of her dead babies at county fair freak shows so that she can send a hundred dollars a week back to her husband’s extended family (Mason 310, 345)—are heartbreaking enough to make even the staunchest anti-feminist reader seethe with rage. Abounding with scenes and scenarios like the one just described, the entire 454 page novel causes the readers to empathize with a woman who has no foreseeable way out of the patriarchal system that is blatantly harming her. Furthermore, the narrative strategy employed and the intense focus on Christie’s own inability to see and/or break away from the very systems attacking her force readers to identify and reevaluate the ways in which women are still expected to meet society’s specific gender expectations.

In tackling these issues concerning gender identity and gendered roles within the community, Mason weaves each character’s religious beliefs into the text. As will be discussed later in this work, Christie sees the birth of her quintuplets as the possible result of an ecstatic religious experience she has while at a camp meeting. A 1993 book review for the New York Times states that Christie sees, “the babies as a sign [from God], but has no idea what the message might be” (McCorkle). Even though the book contains strong feminist critiques of the place and treatment of women in society, the characters’ focus on seeing and touching a sign from God and discovering what God was saying through the quintuplets firmly grounds its feminist agenda within religious discourse. Christie’s faith and her desire to find the godly
message within her experiences becomes a literary example of how testifying provides—to borrow from Bean—a forum in which women’s voices and concerns can be heard. By depicting Christie as a mother who wishes to preserve her family and position within the community and yet is in a position where her perceived special relationship with God conflicts with her family’s and community’s expectations, Mason challenges gender roles and social practices in a way that is more palatable to Appalachian readers. Thus, just as in Seitz’s experiences with feminism and labor activism within Appalachia, Feather Crowns utilizes spiritual language that evokes sympathy from the readers in ways that advocate social change.

What makes Feather Crowns truly fascinating, however, is that while Mason grounds Christie and her family’s conversations within religious discourse, the novel critiques the violent and gendered nature of that discourse itself. As I will show later, it is Christie’s very status as an ecstatic religious icon that strips her of much of her power and decision-making ability, making her acquiescent to demands concerning the children that she knew were dangerous or wrong. Furthermore, the novel’s themes and dialogues suggest that Christie’s and the community’s desire to understand miraculous and ecstatic experiences brings about physical, spiritual, and emotional estrangement and death within the Wheeler household. Toward the end of the novel, Christie sees “the flaw in her desire to understand why such an extraordinary event had happened to her. It wasn’t why it happened—that couldn’t be known; it was what the world made of it that was the issue” (Mason 417). It is the very discourse that supposedly gives Christie the most power that ultimately leaves her powerless and strips away everything that she holds most dear. Thus, Mason uses religious discourse in a way that both strengthens her novel’s appeal and credibility within the eyes of many Appalachian readers and challenges the privileged nature of ecstatic religious experience as a discursive tool in the first place.
CHAPTER II. OF FAMILIES AND REVIVALS: PERSONAL RELIGIOUS ECSTASY

Written by Kentucky native Bobbie Ann Mason, Feather Crowns is the fictional account of a Kentucky farmwife named Christianna Wheeler who gives birth to quintuplets in February of 1900. The miraculous news of her children’s birth is quickly picked up by both local and national newspapers, and droves of people arrive by foot, horse, and even train (the nearby train begins making a special stop to drop off people) in order to see and touch the babies…a service for which Wad (Christie’s husband’s uncle) begins to charge people ten cents apiece (Mason 207). Christie’s misgivings about letting so many people handle her helpless infants day after day prove prophetic as each child sickens and dies within a few weeks of being born—a tragedy which everyone except Christie attributes to a sign from God. Christie and her husband James are further exploited when they are convinced to place the embalmed quintuplets in a display case and embark on an interstate tour to show their miracle to hundreds of paying customers. Eventually, Christie (who is afraid that the babies will be dug up by novelty-seekers if they are buried) convinces James to deposit the children in the restricted section of a history museum, thus taking them out of the public eye forever and goes home to resume taking care of her three older children (Mason 411-415).

Religious Affiliation: Primitive Baptists meet Holiness

While Mason’s book can certainly be read as an indictment on an American society that exploits both women and the economically disadvantaged, deep threads of a conflicted religious identity and religious ecstasy also run throughout the entire text. The book begins with Christie going into labor. She is convinced that she is giving birth to something inhuman and she envisions her womb as being full of snakes or devils (Mason 4-5). Once the children are born,
the community sees the quintuplets’ births, short lives (and their rapid deaths) as a mysterious sign from God to mark the turning of the century. The novel also includes large sections detailing revivals, brush arbor meetings, church services with pointed sermons, and different characters’ personal takes on the nature of God. By utilizing these plot devices and themes, Mason makes religious ideology visible to the reader while at the same time utilizing that very ideology for her own ends. Moriarty describes this phenomenon within literature as a practice in which, “the ideology itself becomes visible as ideology (rather than as truth)… it offers an implicit critique of its own ideological content. Instead of sweeping us away, as we are swept away in the flux of lived experience (of ideology), the text thus offers a certain release from ideology” (46). Feather Crowns, therefore, privileges and critiques religious ideology’s effect on gender identity by forcing the reader to see religious ideology for what it is—a system of meaning developed as an imaginary relationship between Christie and the conditions of her existence. The readers’ perception of this ideology influences their understanding of both Christie’s gendered place within her society and the reasons behind the decisions she makes on behalf of herself and her children.

In order to truly understand the impact and complexities of Mason’s use of religious ideology in Feather Crowns, one must first identify the cultural and ideological constraints of Christie’s particular faith. Defining Christie’s religious identity is not an easy matter. First, it is important to note that while she attends church services with the rest of the Wheeler family, Christie only joined that particular church after she married James and moved several hours away to his family’s farm. The only explicit information that Mason gives about Christie’s religious upbringing is that her congregation disapproves of dancing (Mason 44), refers to the pastor as “Brother Woodall” (Mason 46) and regards finding pleasure in sex as sinful (Mason
The Wheeler clan appears to share these beliefs, with Mason adding extra information on its values and practices. The Wheelers, who go to church weekly and are presided over by Brother Jones, seem reticent to believe that God sends miracles to act as signs. Instead, they ascribe to the belief that God occasionally tests people, wanting them “to trust in Him and stop trying to figure everything out” (Mason 269). Brother Jones, meanwhile, preaches in an established church with a graveyard instead of in a brush arbor, and appears to be the head authority within the church. Mason also establishes the fact that he leads a small country church—not a large denominational church like the Methodist one in town (Mason 258).

These seeming random pieces of information (along with other hints scattered throughout the text) may well cause readers to come to the conclusion that both Christie and the Wheelers are Primitive Baptists.¹ While not well-known on a national scale, Primitive Baptist churches are found throughout central Appalachia and have a distinctive church hierarchy and theodicy. Due to their belief that only God should be revered, Primitive Baptist pastors—who are always male—are referred to as either Elder or Brother (Taylor). Within the Primitive Baptist church as a whole, “All collaboration or cooperation beyond the local church context is voluntary… The ultimate freedom and independence of each local congregation, be it old and established or new and emerging, are respected” (“Baptist Schisms…”). Therefore, each local congregation functions autonomously, with individual churches often forming loose sub-regional associations that provide some cohesion and support while at the same time acknowledging each church’s

¹ For the purposes of this project, when I refer to Primitive Baptists, I am referencing several linked (yet slightly different) versions of mountain Baptists, including Regular Baptists, United Baptists, and some Independent Baptists. While these different Baptist affiliations do have some characteristics that distinguish them from each other, they tend to have very similar church hierarchies, gender norms, social concerns and understanding of the nature of one’s personal relationship with God (McCaulay 181-182). It is not necessary or feasible within the scope of this project to determine which precise form of mountain Baptist theology and theodicy is most influencing Christie.
individual autonomy (McCauley 185). As the Minutes and Church Constitution of the 139th Annual Session of the Old Bethlehem Association\(^2\) state, each association has “no power to lord over God’s heritage nor shall they infringe on the internal rights of any church in the union” (Echo Church 23). Such churches are often opposed to large, evangelizing faith movements (Hill 144), which they believe rob individual churches of their autonomy and therefore weaken each church’s ability to live out the will of God. This opposition to large denominations helps explain moments in which the characters in *Feather Crowns* express distrust of larger, more established denominations like the Methodists.

Primitive Baptist theology plays out in the lives of individuals in much the same way that its hierarchy privileges individual churches. As McCauley asserts, Primitive Baptists’ particular brand of Calvinism carries with it a regionally-specific understanding of God that emphasizes, “grace and the Holy Spirit that expresses itself through tender, heartfelt worship practices” (182). Bean explains this phenomenon by saying that for believers, “salvation itself is the mutual work of God and human beings and illustrates the process model of a divine persuasive power” (171). Rather than focusing on miraculous occurrences and physical manifestations of God’s might, individuals often turn to emotional experiences of the Almighty’s love—referred to as a “sweet hope in my breast” (McCauley 182)—as proof that they are of the Elect. Thus, while Primitive Baptist minutes and constitutions tend to include a statement proclaiming the Bible is the literal and infallible word of God,\(^3\) they are often firmly opposed to looking for physical signs of God’s

\(^2\) The Old Bethlehem Association is a sub-regional association of Close Communion United Baptists with churches located in Ohio and West Virginia. A member of the association provided me with a copy of the Constitution, Articles of Faith, and minutes from the association’s annual meeting in 2009. While the specific wording of the Articles of Faith and bylaws vary from association to association, the understood independence of each church is a foundational belief for the vast majority of Primitive Baptist churches (Hill 143-144).

\(^3\) The bylaws of most Primitive Baptists Associations require them to publish the minutes for their yearly association meetings. Due to a distrust of outsiders and the high cost of printing, most associations distribute...
miraculous power in the contemporary world. Some associations are made so uncomfortable by talk of miracles or a physical Apocalypse that they craft statements proclaiming

We believe that the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, and both Jews and Gentiles must be born again to become subjects or citizens of this Kingdom. (John 3:4-5; Col. 1:13) We believe the Kingdom of God and of Christ to be the same. (John 17:10)

We do not believe that Christ will sit on an earthly, ‘literal’ throne in the city of Jerusalem, and will reign over an earthly kingdom for a thousand years. If we have any Elder, Deacon, or member in our association that teaches or advocates this doctrine, their home church should deal with them accordingly. (Echo Church 26)

McCauley goes on to explain that such an emphasis on the individual heart (and not the intellect or the larger body of the Church) as the seat of spiritual knowledge and the place that most influences people’s words and actions has become an identity marker that sustains conflict between Appalachian theodicy and dominant American Protestantism (184).

It would be naive, however, to conclude that Primitive Baptists’ belief in an individual, highly personal, and emotion-based form of salvation does not include social obligations. Samuel Hill asserts that while such congregations may stress individuality, they function to “preserve their [individual] communities as they are—or intend to be. Excessive worldliness is to be bridled, strong families are to be developed…they aim to foster a single good, that of the ‘local church authority and community’” (144). Hill goes onto postulate that Appalachian

minutes only to members of the association and to other associations with whom they have entered into correspondence. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain copies of minutes. The constitutions of both the Old Bethlehem Association and the New Zion Association of United Baptist contain statements about the infallibility of the New Testament in their articles of faith, and the trend to interpret the Bible in such a manner is seen throughout many mountain faith communities.
Calvinist faith’s implicit trust of and emotional reliance on a mysterious God serves to foreclose conversations and actions that may challenge unfair social systems. Instead, part of God’s mystery is the reality in which people live, and they must trust God to bring about effective change (Hill 149). Bean also touches upon this issue when she notes that within constructs like those found within Primitive Baptist faith, “although natural evils such as sickness and death cause personal suffering, they are also a metaphysically necessary part of God’s good creation” (176). Thus, such ‘evils’ may cause inner meditation, but it is unlikely that they will cause people to fight for social or economic changes. Instead, the faithful are expected to trust in God’s goodness, hope for an eventual personal revelation about his/her pain, and turn to their families and traditional support networks in times of trouble. Rather than feeling the need to transform unfair and/or discriminatory social practices, congregants believe that if they continue to hold fast to their faith and customs, they, “will finally persevere through the grace to glory” (Fairmount Church 18).

The above-mentioned hierarchy and theodicy may well provide the basis for Christie’s upbringing and official religious affiliation; however, this system is complicated by Christie’s notable fear that she is giving birth to a devils (Mason 5) and nearby community members’ constant referrals to the births and later deaths of the children as a miraculous sign from God. As previously mentioned, Primitive Baptists generally do not look for miraculous signs sent from heaven. Instead, they practice a practical faith that focuses on one’s personal relationship with the godhead and often discourages attempts to explain the mysterious ways of the divine. Thus, Christie’s inner fear about the babies’ spiritual meaning and the community members’ belief that they are an apocalyptic sign must come out of another faith tradition—that of Holiness Pentecostalism.
Sharing some similarities with Primitive Baptist movements, Holiness Pentecostalism—which is often shortened to just Holiness—is a widespread religious phenomenon within Central Appalachia. McCauley postulates that the thousands of Holiness churches (which often adopt regionally specific monikers like “The Church of God with Signs Following”) scattered throughout Appalachia dwarf the number of nationally recognized denominational churches and constitute the region’s largest faith tradition (186). Holiness history is difficult to trace—in part because its tendency towards schisms and lack of official church records or membership rolls keeps it from being considered an official religious affiliation by census takers (McCauley 186) and in part because several different-yet-linked versions of Pentecostalism emerged across the United States at approximately the same time (Kinnard, “Pentecostal Early…”). McCauley considers Central Appalachia’s Holiness churches to be a response to the Great Revival of the nineteenth century (185). Kathleen Mulhern and Jacob Kinnard both note that the Holiness movement was nationally prominent at the beginning of the 20th century (“Holiness… Overview”). Therefore, it would have been a large force within Appalachian Kentucky during Christie’s pregnancy of 1899-1900.

Holiness churches generally have a hierarchy that is very similar to that of Primitive Baptists. Like their Primitive Baptist compatriots, Holiness members distrust large-scale denominations and instead attend small churches that form loose affiliations with other Holiness churches on a sub-regional basis (McCauley 185-186). Also like the Primitive Baptists, Holiness churches are led by an elder or brother who feels called by the Spirit to preach but has not attended a formal seminary (McCauley 185). However, whereas Primitive Baptist churches are always presided over by male preachers, Holiness churches are occasionally (though rarely) presided over by women. Mulhern and Kinnard note that many women had leadership roles
within the Pentecostal Movement at large during the early 20th century but that these positions were later scaled back to isolated occurrences as time progressed (“Pentecostal Leadership…”). Indeed, the predominance of male pastors is so great that Hill makes the mistaken assumption that all religious leaders within the Holiness movement are male (143). McCauley, however, states that new Holiness churches are started “by a man or a woman who feels called to preach to his or her family, friends, and neighbors” (185, emphasis added). This statement demonstrates that while adherents’ embrasure of traditional gender roles makes female leaders a relatively small minority within the Holiness church, there is still room for them (Kinnard, “Pentecostal Leadership…”).

Theologically, Holiness congregations share many of the same core beliefs of Primitive Baptists, but they realize these beliefs in very different manners. Like Primitive Baptists, Holiness congregations are historically tied to regionally-specific forms of Mountain Calvinism. The two faiths also share a common belief in a highly personal salvation experience. Unlike Primitive Baptists, however, the Holiness faith draws further inspiration from early Wesleyanism (Kinnard, “Holiness…Overview”). Over time, the addition of Wesleyan teachings and the large-scale ecstatic experiences found within The Great Revival created a system in which adherents were encouraged to look for miraculous signs from the Lord in both their personal lives and in the life of the community. According to Dr. Don Thorsen, of Azusa Pacific University’s C.P. Haggard Graduate School of Theology, the Holiness movement utilizes Wesley’s teachings to demonstrate how, “God sanctifies believers, transforming them into greater Christ-likeness. As they respond to God’s grace, consecrating themselves entirely to God as Lord of their lives as well as Savior, God gives even greater blessings of the fruit of the Spirit and of empowerment to better love God and others.” Thus, Holiness church services can include spontaneous preaching
and/or singing, testifying about God’s power and grace, (McCauley 186), glossolalia, prophesying, faith healing (“Kinnard, “Holiness…Overview”), and in rare instances serpent handling (Hill 150). These ecstatic religious experiences may seem frightening, superstitious, or dangerous to outsiders, but to believers, they indicate God has come close enough, “through Word and sacramental presence to let thirsty human souls drink of his presence and power” (Hill 150-151).

The Holiness belief in both individual and communal ecstatic experiences of God’s presence has large implications for how they perceive significant events within their personal lives and communities. Like most forms of Pentecostalism, Holiness adherents believe that humankind is locked in the middle of an epic struggle between good (God) and evil (Satan) (Kinnard, “Pentecostal Suffering). Therefore, Holiness members often interpret positive events as a sign of God’s love and redemptive power and negative events as revelations of the evils inherent in a fallen creation or signs of the coming apocalypse. Since the grace of God is the only way humans can seek redemption in a flawed, sinful, earthly existence, the only faithful response to pain and suffering is to give oneself fully over to God’s way and reject the concerns of the world (Bean 163-164). This theodicy, in turn, leads adherents to seek an understanding of the signs and miracles placed before them. The end result of this search for spiritual revelation on a social scale has much the same result as the Primitive Baptists’ understanding of a mysterious-yet-loving God; adherents are once again called away from fighting for sociopolitical

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4 Glossolalia is a spiritual gift in which a person speaks in tongues (an unknown language thought to be the speech-pattern of Jesus and/or the Holy Spirit). Individuals who believe in this practice interpret the Pentecost story from the Book of Acts—in which tongues of fire came down from heaven, imbuing the disciples with both the Holy Spirit and the ability to communicate with each person in his/her own language—as Biblical proof that they are part of an unbroken stream of supernatural activity spurred by the direct experience of the Holy Spirit” (Kinnard, “Pentecostal Beginnings”).
change, instead attributing pain and suffering to forces beyond their control and waiting for the always good and loving God to create a better world (Hill 150).

**Birthing Demons**

Considering the strong Holiness themes that run through portions of the text, Mason’s decision to set *Feather Crowns* in turn-of-the-century Appalachia—a time and place rampant with Holiness faith—can hardly be considered coincidental. The Great Revival of the 19th century caused a massive increase in perceived signs and visions of a fast-approaching End Times (Masci par. 6). Such signs and visions were often tied to specific dates within the near future that were generally expected to be followed by great environmental or social upheavals. Therefore, these signs and visions can be used to betray the social anxieties preying upon the minds of their cultures. These apocalyptic fears play a major factor in *Feather Crowns*. During the early stages of Christie’s pregnancy, pastors in the Hopewell community and beyond prophesy that the new century will bring Judgment Day with it (Mason 57). Soon, prognosticators foretell a destructive earthquake that will begin soon after “the dawn of the new century,” and last for months until it destroys everything in the region (Mason 57). Tying the turn of the century to visions about the presumed destruction of everything from towns to farms to the very land indicates that many people within the Hopewell community fear the perceived destructive influence of modernization upon its people and its agrarian way of life.

Christie’s reaction to these apocalyptic rumors is heavily influenced by her gendered position within ecstatic religious discourse. Amy Hollywood explains that mystical or ecstatic religious experiences are often divided into two distinct gender categories: masculine mysticism is thought to be “speculative, intellectual, and often explicitly antivisionary” while feminine
mysticism is “affective, emotional, visionary, and often erotic” (Hollywood 8). The gendered understanding that females have emotional and affective ecstatic experiences often leads those within ecstatic religious discourse to pathologize female ecstatic experience and search for abnormal physical states as divine proof of feminine ecstasy (Hollywood 2, 4, 8). Denied access to the intellectual or speculative discourse left to the males of her society, Christie’s natural reaction to rampant tales concerning an upcoming judgment would be to think about and discuss it in terms of her own emotional and bodily experience. Therefore, as her pregnancy progresses and she becomes more and more concerned about both her abnormal size and the strange, painful movements within her, Christie associates it with a coming apocalypse, noting that her womb, “rumbled and roared like the earth about to split open” (Mason 57). Rhetorically, Christie is articulating cultural anxieties concerning modernization and an end to a specific way of life and articulating it in terms of her pregnancy. To the frightened mother-to-be, it appears as if the prophecy of a months-long earthquake is taking place beneath her skin. Her physical body and its processes as her pregnancy approaches full term have taken on extreme religious and cultural significance to her.

Christie’s troubled relationship to the Holiness rhetoric being tossed about is further complicated when she and her sister-in-law Amanda attend a large camp meeting/revival in the early months of her pregnancy. Christie attends the camp meeting because she wants a chance to get away from the farm and the rest of the Wheeler clan (Mason 62). Christie’s attempt to frame her excursion as a religious revitalization mirrors the approaches taken by many Appalachian women. In *Women, Development, and Communities for Empowerment in Appalachia*, Virginia Seitz explains that many of people she collected data from referred to
their churches as important to their social and community lives, especially during childhood. It provided social outlets for people who had neither the resources nor opportunities to find them elsewhere. It was a place to gather, to meet friends outside your familial circle; this was especially important to women and girls who tended to be confined to the domestic sphere. (123)

For Christie and Amanda, a religious function is the only place they can escape their domestic spheres within their individual family units on the Wheeler farm. Since the revival is a religious event meant to revive one’s faith by destroying any mental or emotional states that may be alienating a person from God’s love, James and Wad are quite willing to let their wives spend multiple days away from home in the company of thousands of other men, women, and children. Thus, the religious fervor surrounding the Holiness faith in general and the upcoming new century in particular gives Christie the power to step outside her living situation and commune with individuals outside her typical family unit.

Christie also goes to the Reelfoot Revival in an attempt to come to terms with the new life growing inside of her. Hollywood explains that for Bataille, it is only when “humans beings are exhausted by existence and full of self-loathing [that] they turn to God as a source of salvation…God always conforms to humanity, which suggests that human conceptions of the divine are projections of human desire” (67). Already in an untenable position within the Wheeler family structure and the mother of three young children, Christie has serious concerns about bringing another child into the world. Furthermore, she is already concerned that the symptoms of this particular pregnancy are stranger and more intense than her previous pregnancies. Her blood “rushed through her veins in an anxious tide,” and she experiences intense nausea and dizziness, leading her to vividly remember a difficult pregnancy and labor her
mother underwent (Mason 63). Instead of confiding in anyone about these concerns, however, Christie tells James that she has been “feeling wild in the head lately and needed to pray. He said she was mentally alienated [from God]. If he had known her secret [that she was pregnant], he would not have let her go to a camp meeting” (Mason 63). On one level, Christie is manipulating her culture’s understanding of a personal-yet-fragile mental and emotional tie with God in order to convince her family to let her go on a vacation with her sister-in-law. On a deeper level, however, she is turning to God in an attempt to resolve her anxieties concerning her pregnancy. God, she believes, will calm her fears and protect her as she learns undergoes the trials and tribulations of what she envisions will be a difficult and possibly deadly confinement.

Although attending the revival has the positive potential to allow Christie to socialize with other women and reflect on her pregnancy before informing James about it, it also entails unforeseen risks for her. As a Primitive Baptist, Christie is someone who has attended camp meetings before but does not expect to experience physical manifestations of a divine presence. Indeed, some Primitive Baptist associations use the belief in a physical manifestations of God’s earthly kingdom to bar people from becoming elders or even members of their churches (Echo Church 26, 52). Therefore, Christie hopes to experience the individual and emotional ecstatic experience of feeling God’s spiritual presence without participating in any physical or large-scale group ecstatic religious experience. Georges Bataille equates this type of ecstatic religious experience with the desert, explaining that “there is no longer a limited existence…it is the most complete abandonment of the concerns of ‘present day man’ (27-28). The subject feels as if he/she has become a spiritual part of God and transcends the earthly realm and its concerns. When Brother Cornett begins preaching, this type of ecstasy is just the type of experience that Christie begins to have. In the early moments of religious ecstasy, Christie feels as if the
preacher, “touched something in her that had been all knotted up, and now it seemed to be coming unraveled. She had felt this once before, when a fever broke…for several weeks Christie’s mind had been going at cross-purposes. But now it was clearing and all her feelings were concentrating into one large wave inside her” (Mason 76-77). At this point, Christie is completely caught within a loving, ecstatic experience; while it is new and different for her, it seems complete within the bounds of her belief in a personal, emotionally-based salvation experience. Christie is feeling the “sweet hope in the breast” that she has spent her entire life hearing about and hoping to experience.

She is caught completely by surprise, therefore, when the tenor of the experience changes and she realizes that she has become a participant in a group ecstatic experience. Christie’s ecstasy soon takes on an unexpected level of terror when the men and woman around her start jerking, screaming, and barking at unseen devils (Mason 77-78). These types of actions are often ones associated with the Holiness faith and are understood by adherents to be a physical manifestation of God’s power and presence within their lives. Having no experience or training in how to deal with this sort of ecstatic experience, Christie is understandably frightened and confused. This fear and confusion combines with the emotional ecstasy she is still caught up in, causing her to react violently to the situation. When encouraged by Amanda to feel the spirit of God, she cries out, “I do!...But I don’t want to bark at devils of fall over like a tree” (78). She also has no religious training in what such an experience might do to an unborn child; it is not surprising, then, that during the rest of Christie’s pregnancy, she repeatedly flashes back to her experience at the revival during her difficult pregnancy, wondering if the fetus growing within

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For a more detailed explanation of how Holiness signs and miracles are recognized and interpreted by congregants, refer back to pages 37-38 of this thesis.
her has somehow been tainted or turned into a demon by her terrifying encounter with religious ecstasy.

Furthermore, Christie has trouble reconciling her sexual desires with a culture and faith tradition that regards sex as dangerous and inherently sinful. Various groups of religious conservatives throughout the United States often feel the need to resist threats to traditional familial, sexual, and gender roles or else risk bringing the wrath of God upon them (Lyerly 113). This tendency is pervasive throughout Appalachia—particularly for women. As Kinnard notes, Pentecostals and other conservative faiths view sex as something that one has for the chief purpose of procreation (“Pentecostal Gender…”). Engaging in sex for pleasure is a dangerous and sinful practice that can lead the faithful astray and has potential to harm both the individuals engaging in such acts and the family unit as a whole. Frankly put, good Christians learn to avoid feeling or giving in to sexual desire.

The perceived dangers of sexual desire are often learned not through what is said about sex, but what remains unsaid about the topic. Seitz’s interviews with working class women in western Virginia led her to the discovery that most young women are taught very little about sexuality. At the same time, these girls feel pressured by the boys to be sexually active and by their families to marry at a young age in order to keep from becoming loose women (Seitz 53). McCauley also notes this trend, although in a much vaguer manner. She explains that within Appalachian faith systems, “codes delineate how people should act or behave; they are the unspoken boundaries or limits of personal conduct, whether at a meeting in the church house or in everyday life” (188). Within Appalachian religious and familial discourse on sexuality and gender, the silences surrounding unspoken boundaries are just as meaningful and rhetorically driven as the spoken discourse on the topic. Topics, practices, and feelings that that are elided or
willfully ignored within conversation are equated as being unthinkable or completely off-limits for an ethical, moral person. Thus, many young women learn what to believe about sex by what their churches and families imply but do not openly say about it—namely that it is dangerous and should be avoided except in instances of procreation. They are stuck in the virgin-whore dichotomy (Seitz 53) in which any admission of pleasure or even frank conversation about sex has the potential to turn them into fallen women.

Feminist Simone de Beauvoir refers to this type of dichotomy when she writes, “ambivalence will seem to be an intrinsic quality of the Eternal Feminine. The saintly mother has for correlative the cruel stepmother, the angelic young girl has the perverse virgin: thus it will be said sometimes Mother equals Life, sometimes that Mother equals death, and every virgin is pure spirit or flesh dedicated to the devil” (de Beauvoir 1408). This attempt to define the Eternal Feminine leads to a situation in which women “appear under various aspects; but each of the myths built up around the subject of woman is intended to sum her up in toto; each aspires to be unique. In consequence, a number of incompatible myths exist…if woman is depicted as the Praying Mantis, the Mandrake, the Demon, then it is most confusing to find in woman also the Muse, the Goddess Mother, Beatrice” (de Beauvoir 1407-1408, emphasis in original). Critics have documented similar searches for the Eternal Feminine in the depictions of both literary figures and cultural icons ranging from Shakespeare to Ingrid Bergman. Obviously, the virgin-whore dichotomy is an influential ideology not limited to Appalachia.

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Both within Appalachia and outside the region, women are constantly being placed in categories that demark them as either virtuous (and inherently asexual) or debauched. No room is left within patriarchal discourse for a woman who falls somewhere between these categories. Therefore, Appalachian women who are raised in households in which sex is a forbidden topic learn that sexual desire itself is sinful and may take pains not to mention it at all, lest they become living examples of de Beauvoir’s “flesh dedicated to the devil” (1408).

The virgin-whore dichotomy becomes extremely problematic for Christie, who is troubled by the fact that she finds great physical pleasure in submitting to James’s sexual advances. Due to the extreme moral discomfit provoked by the topic of sexual pleasure, no one has ever talked to Christie about it, leading her to conclude that there is not “a word for it. She had never heard it spoken about except in the vaguest terms…”’what they did in the dark,’ ‘the matrimonial union,’ ‘the marriage bed,’ ‘planting seed,’ ‘joining like animals.’ Mama referred to it as ‘the wifely duty.’ Christie and James found a whimsical word of their own for it—‘plowing,’” (Mason 41). While the novel does not mention James’s view on the topic of sexual pleasure, Christie’s position is clear: since there are not even words to describe the pleasure she feels during sex, than there must be something furtive or sinful about it. Christie believes that instead of enjoying herself, she should be submissive and feel as if she is doing her wifely duty by ‘joining like animals’ in order to procreate. Sex should be something that must be endured for the survival of the species—not a pleasurable act. Therefore, she should be ashamed of her desire to copulate with her husband.

Christie is not alone in seeing her sexual desire as being abnormal and sinful. Upon first moving to Hopewell, Christie and James live with Wad, Amanda, and several other family members while their house is being built. Christie quickly realizes that she never hears the other
married couples who live in the house having sex and that on “mornings after a particularly noisy session in the uncooperative bed, she would go downstairs and everyone at the table would stop eating and stare at her as if she were the loosest woman in all of Sodom and Gomorrah combined” (Mason 54). It is apparent to Christie that the other family members are morally outraged over the obvious pleasure she feels when ‘plowing’ with her husband. This situation becomes even more problematic when one acknowledges that “men’s (and women’s) anxieties about disease, pain, and death are projected onto women’s bodies. These bodies are the site of the repressed desires and traumatic emotions—at times taken on willingly, at other times resisted, although usually without lasting success” (Hollywood 18). The Wheeler relatives’ blatant stares clearly communicate to Christie that she should be ashamed of her sinful willingness to give into base desires of the flesh that God-fearing Christians like themselves repress. Her physical body and the pleasures she allows it to feel represent the entire family’s anxieties about both sex and faith, turning her into a sexual scapegoat deemed unfit to even have breakfast with moral, upright people.

The Wheelers’ perception of Christie as sexually depraved has a negative impact on the way she interprets her desires and her place within the social and moral order. Bataille notes that as people age, they delegate the confidence they once had for their parents “to other men. What the child found in the apparently steady existence of his relatives, man seeks in all places where life converges ” (87). In attempting to find this confidence and stability, the subject acts as a particle within an unstable group. He or she both desires to retain individual autonomy by denying his/her position within the group yet at the same time seeks to transcend individual experience by participating as a member of the collective. Therefore, the subject’s
will for autonomy opposes it at first to the whole, but it withers—is reduced to nothing—to the extent that it refuses to enter into it. It then renounces autonomy for the sake of the whole, but temporarily: the will for autonomy is only abated for a time and quickly, in a single moment in which balance is achieved, being devotes itself to the whole and at the same time devotes the whole to itself. (Bataille 85)

The subject, then, leads an anguished existence in which it constantly engages in an unviable attempt to satiate its conflicting desires to both devote everything to its own will and devote everything to the good of the whole.

Having moved far from her parents and living on an isolated tobacco farm with only her husband, children, and various in-laws for daily socialization and companionship, Christie is an autonomous particle within the unstable group of the Wheeler family. Falling in line with Bataille’s theories, she seeks a steady existence by attempting to meet the expectations of the family as a whole but still struggles to maintain her autonomy as opposed to her relatives. The Wheelers’ open disgust concerning Christie’s sexual practices symbolizes her inability to please both herself and her kin. Their silent stares chastise her for threatening the emotional and spiritual good of the family unit with her sinful lust and “reckless plowing” (Mason 54), causing her to feel ashamed of her passion even as she “thrilled to the pleasure of touching and barely touching and glimpsing and inching closer and feeling in the dark a bit of flesh that she couldn’t name immediately” (Mason 50). Therefore, she experiences the persistent anguish of being unable to satisfy both herself and the group—an anguish that, according to Bataille, constantly pursues the subject, causing him/her to once again surrender to “the desire to submit the world to [his/her] autonomy” (85). Christie, then, endlessly cycles between attempting to set the Wheelers’ disapproval aside in order to privilege her autonomy and pleasure and attempting to
maintain her place within the group by disavowing her sexual nature. The anguish created by this constant battle within her ensures that she will continue to wage war with herself over her position as an autonomous being occupying an unstable position within the Wheeler collective.

Bataille notes that within most rhetoric surrounding religious ecstasy, the subject is expected to deny himself/herself sexual pleasure (23). The subject’s anticipated denial of erotic desire, however, is made problematic by his postulation that the eroticism surrounding people is so violent, it intoxicates hearts with so much force—to conclude, its abyss is so deep within us—that there is no celestial opening which does not take its form and fever from it—who among us does not dream of breaking open the gates of the mystical realm—who does not imagine himself ‘dying to die,’ to be pining away, to ruin himself in order to love? (Bataille 120)

Eroticism—the inescapable intoxicant of the heart—is everywhere, flavoring day-to-day life and ecstatic religious experiences alike. Since religious ecstasy is always-already erotic, it is inevitable that some supplicants feel physically aroused during their ecstatic experience. Since, as already discussed, certain forms of Appalachian discourse treat sexual desires as a taboo subject, the inherent eroticism of ecstatic religious experience has the potential to frighten and disturb Appalachian women who experience it.

Christie’s conflicted position concerning her sexual desires comes into dramatic play once the erotic nature of ecstasy is made real to Christie during the Reelfoot Revival. Brother Cornett—the same man Christie holds responsible for her physical, group ecstatic experience—is a sexually attractive man. Indeed, his appearance and personality are so mesmeric that the women cannot keep their eyes off of him—an issue that causes Christie to feel ashamed since,
“married women weren’t supposed to notice men this way—especially a preacher” (Mason 71).

The night after Brother Cornett leads the crowd to an ecstatic experience of the Lord, Christie has a dream in which Brother Cornett’s voice, “caressed her—first her breasts, then her legs. She could feel him in her, his long, hot tool churning in her, to the rhythm of ‘Bringing in the Sheaves,’” (82). Having already infiltrated her mind and emotions earlier in the day, Brother Cornett’s voice and the ecstasy it inspires bring the sleeping Christie to physical and sexual completion with its caress, merging the holy spiritual and emotional pleasure she hoped to gain from the revival with the sexual desire that is partially responsible for her strained relationship with her husband’s family. His words themselves become the “tool” that churns inside her and brings to experience unbidden and unspoken forms of ecstasy. Since Christie has neither the rhetorical tools to discuss sexual desire nor the religious instruction she needs in order to process a physically ecstatic religious experience, she is both thrilled and terrified by this merger of physical/sexual and spiritual/emotional ecstasy within her body. Therefore, she is genuinely afraid that this passion that seems to simultaneously come from outside herself and beneath her flesh at might harm her or her unborn child.

Bataille further postulates that within ecstatic experience, “the mystic has the power to animate what pleases him; the intensity suffocates, eliminates doubt, and one perceives what one was expecting…Rapture is not a window looking out on the outside, on the beyond, but a mirror” (54). This postulation certainly holds true for the frightened, confused, and aroused Christie, who seeks to understand her experience at the Reelfoot Revival within the context of her previous beliefs, struggles, and fears. Rather than using the experience to question the supposed sinfulness of sexual desire, Christie turns inward, believing that the sexually-charged religious ecstasy demonstrates that Brother Cornett is dangerous and is a reminder her own sinful
nature. As Mason shows in the scene below, his presence is so threatening to Christie that she becomes physically ill when placed in proximity to him the day after her erotic dream:

In the morning, the sunrise service was interrupted by firecrackers. Babies squalled. Christie ate a piece of fatback and a biscuit with molasses, and in the middle of the morning love feast—the communion where they took bread and grape juice at the altar—she vomited up her breakfast.

The mess slopped onto Amanda’s hem. Christie was startled and appalled, but Amanda put her arm around her and said, “That’s all right Christie. Go and get it all out.”

“That’s the same thing Brother Cornett was saying to all of us sinners,” Christie said.

(Mason 83)

Although one could argue that Christie is simply experiencing standard morning sickness, the tenor of the passage, its placement directly after she articulates her fear that her experiences at the revival will hurt her baby, and its specific reference back to Brother Cornett imply that his presence at the love feast has made her physically ill. Furthermore, the fact that she vomits during a ceremony specifically intended to bring everyone into a harmonious relationship with other Christians8 points to the spiritual significance of this scene. As Christie continues to retch, her body is attempting to physically and spiritually expel Brother Cornett’s lingering presence. Far from helping soothe her troubled spirit, the spiritual and sexual

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8 Mason’s in-text description of a love feast as simply a form of communion is somewhat misleading for readers who have not seen or participated in one. According to Kinnard in “Protestant Worship and Devotion in Daily Life,” a love feast as a specialized form of communion that includes hymn singing and sharing a meal in an attempt to foster harmony between congregants.
experiences Christie had at the revival act as a toxin, corrupting her mind and body with feelings, desires, and fears that she finds startling and unholy.

Christie’s ecstatic religious experiences at the revival have far-reaching consequences after she returns home. Just as the religious and sexual ecstasy she experiences at Reelfoot is both familiar and terrifying when placed in the context of her previous experiences, so this new pregnancy both harkens back to and completely defies her expectations. Already concerned about how such an ecstatic religious experience may affect an unborn child, Christie becomes assured that Brother Cornett’s preaching and infiltration of her dreams during the revival is the cause of her increasingly abnormal pregnancy. This fear harkens back to Hollywood’s notion that religious ecstasy often becomes inscribed on women’s bodies in the form of abnormal physical states. Assuming that whatever was different with her ecstatic experience is synonymous with whatever is wrong with the fetus, Christie believes that Brother Cornett is the ultimate cause of her suffering; the invisible demons that others barked at and physical and emotional release that she felt while dreaming of having sex-out-of-wedlock have claimed their place on her physical body by lodging themselves within her womb. During childbirth, she believes she is giving birth to frogs, pigs, and/or something with a tail, and demands that Amanda bring in an ax to kill any possible devils that emerge from between her legs (Mason 17, 29). In Christie’s mind, all other possible explanations concerning her large size and the turbulence within her womb are suffocated out of existence. Surely, a demon is about to be born.

For Christie, then, the convergence of an indefinable religious ecstasy and unspeakable sexual eroticism has produced something terrifying and demonic. Instead of fostering a sweet hope in her breast, a devotion to ecstatic experience has created a monster that destroys her sanity even as it rips apart her womb. Mason’s dark description of both Christie’s unstable state
of mind and the earthquake taking place beneath her skin challenges gendered Appalachian religious ideologies that demand that a woman’s faith and the pleasures of the flesh are mutually exclusive topics that should not be openly discussed. Indeed, readers are left with the perception that in order to avoid a fate such as Christie’s, women should articulate and explore the hopes, fears, and desires that help inform both their religious faith and their gendered place within the family.
“James Lake. Emily Susan,” said Christie, aware of the little flannel-shrouded shapes beside her. Little rabbits in a nest. Twins meant the monster inside her was smaller. Two rescued from his clutches. Maybe she would die. Maybe those fibroids were eating into her. Or maybe the afterbirth was stuck. But the sight of these two tiny, perfectly formed creatures kept her from being so scared now. She felt herself float a little, her weight lessening. The babies’ faces moved simultaneously, as though they were asking silent questions of her. James went out the front door, and she could hear him talk to the dog. She heard Dark-Fire’s light whinny, like the screech owl. She was relieved that James had gone. Then the weight inside—the entire weight this time—moved down with a flood of pain. She pushed and pushed…

Morning came. The moon faded, washed out by the rising light. The room took on a different air, with the light of dawn coming in the kitchen. Mrs. Willy pushed the kitchen curtains back. The doctor went out to feed and water his horse, then checked in once more before he went home to breakfast. He wouldn’t eat anything Alma offered to make him, saying he needed to go home to see about his wife, who had been poorly since the January snow.

Christianna Wheeler had given birth to five babies by then, and she was falling asleep, exhausted. (Mason 32)

The passage above is a transformative moment within Feather Crowns. Considering the terror she experiences throughout her pregnancy and labor, it is little wonder that Christie is
relieved to discover that the giant demon that twisted and turned within her was actually five miniscule—and very human—newborns. As the monster within Christie continues to decrease with each child’s birth, she stops thinking of her babies as demons and instead envisions them as little rabbits lying next to her in the nest that she has prepared for them. Far from needing to utilize the ax she had Amanda place under the bed, Christie immediately falls in love with their frail bodies and plans to protect her children from the clutches of anything or anyone that would harm them—human and demon alike.

The symbolic use of the dawn is of particular importance within this passage. Up until the quintuplets’ birth, Christie has felt benighted and assailed by a spiritual plague on both her spirit and her womb. This fear comes to a crisis when she goes into labor in the dead of night. Indeed, the book starts with Christie hearing the midnight train “whistling up from Memphis” and being horrified that the “creature within her was arriving faster than she expected” (Mason 3). The darkness of the night, complete with its bright moon and the eerie whistle of the train, symbolizes the fear and darkness gripping her heart as she prepares to confront the demonic forces that have been at work inside her. Therefore, as each child comes forth and shows himself/herself to be more reminiscent of a bunny than a devil, a new day approaches and the light of both a physical and emotional dawn fills Christie’s home. As the sunlight enters the kitchen, the entire home takes on “a different air” (Mason 32)—the air of the domestic. Therefore, the novel briefly switches its focus from religious ecstasy and to more domestic concerns like sickly wives and the act of preparing breakfast.

Mirroring this switch of emphasis, Christie re-envisions her pregnancy not as a sign of God’s condemnation or of demonic possession by Brother Cornett but instead as a natural—if rather animalistic—event. She is even embarrassed about her previous fears and feels like she is
“no longer insane…Her dream about Brother Cornett faded from her consciousness now, his ludicrous leer disappearing like a bird in the sky” (Mason 87). At this point, Christie remembers her Primitive Baptist roots and rejects the Holiness notion of physical religious ecstasy and tangible signs of God’s earthly kingdom. She is ready and willing to admit that her enormous girth and excessive pain, anxiety, and fatigue during her confinement were simply caused by her body’s accommodation of an excess of children—not by a sinful pastor planting a demon in her womb during an erotic dream. Thus, as the moon fades before the coming day, Christie reconnects with her pragmatic faith in a loving God who communes spiritually with the faithful but does not fill the world with signs and wonders. The tumultuous quaking within both her womb and her spirit is over.

At the same time, Christie still animates what pleases her in a way that reinforces her previously-held notion that her sinful sexual desire can lead to unforeseen consequences. Although relieved to discover that she has given birth to healthy, human infants, Christie is also slightly mortified as she convinces herself that quintuplets must be the result of the couple’s excess of sexual pleasure. Mason writes, “it seemed fitting that there were so many babies. She and James had gotten carried away with their secret pleasures, and finally it had caught up with them” (Mason 41). Thus, even as her troubling ecstatic moment within the Holiness faith system begins to fade from her consciousness, the pragmatic Primitive Baptist system—complete with clear consequences for a woman who enjoys too much desire and sexual pleasure—reasserts itself. Suddenly, everything makes sense with religious and gender identity once again working together and reifying her understanding of God and her traditional place within the family.
Killing Miracles

Christie’s brief moment of calm is nothing but the eye at the center of a spiritual tornado that will once again place gender and religious roles at odds with each other. As soon as word of Christie’s quintuplets spreads, Holiness-influenced people conclude that the infants are a miraculous sign from God at the beginning of a new century and begin flocking to see and touch the mother and children. Therefore, while Christie may now see her children as just helpless babies and enlist friends and family members to help her feed and care for them, her regional (and soon national) prominence makes her the focal point for people’s perceptions of how religious ecstasy works. These miracles must be seen and touched in order to make God’s presence real for thousands of people who rely on signs and wonders as part of their faith. In a strange reversal of roles, Christie, who just had her own recent brush with religious ecstasy, is now put in the position of Brother Cornett—it is Christie’s duty to bring others into the full presence of God by providing them with access to and information about her miraculous children and her experience of being pregnant with them.

Christie’s sudden shift from being troubled about her own mystical experience to becoming a transcendental signifier of God’s love and compassion within a society that is not even comfortable with female pastors seems like a bizarre change within the scope of Feather Crowns. However, as Amy Hollywood notes, cultures that deny women’s ability to interpret scripture or limit female access to the church hierarchy have historically seen women as being “more porous and imaginative to spiritual visions, auditions, [sic] and other sensations…women were acknowledged to be possible recipients of extraordinary experiences of the spirit. In this situation, women’s experiences of God’s presence become the text they interpret” (9). This sense of women’s more spiritually porous nature translates directly into Christie’s culture which,
while denying their ability to actually preach or write about the nature of God, believes that women have the potential to help others experience a connection to God through the sharing of visions, dreams, and descriptions of physical or emotional religious ecstasy. As a woman involved in miraculous birth, Christie becomes the physical site of a divine revelation that must be shared with both sexes: women, who can share in her experience of the presence of the spirit, and men, who have the ability to interpret this sign from the Almighty. She is a mountain version of the Virgin Mary.

Christie’s status as a religious icon does not, however, function to grant her more autonomy within her family and community. Hollywood explains that rather than transcending the gender categories associated with their sex, female mystics are still culturally relegated to a “secondary position [and] can justify their existence only through or in mystical union with” another (the lover, the child, God)” (140). As previously mentioned, due to this always-already secondary status that women cannot escape, female mystics often fall into the trap of having their ecstatic experience read (by both themselves and others) as an extension of their gendered place within society (Hollywood 127). Therefore, even though Christie and women like her are marked as having shared a special experience with the Almighty, they still must justify their existence as women by acknowledging that their immanence can only be transcended by the intervention of a masculine presence—be it a male family member or a male God. The justification for her continued existence is contingent upon male interpretations of her children as evidence of her mystical union with God. Within her culture, then, Christie’s perceived special relationship with God depends on Holiness adherents placing their perceptions of her firmly within the bounds of acceptable wifehood and motherhood. Therefore, the complete strangers that start pouring into her home without permission feel justified in coming into the bedroom,
voyeuristically watching Christie suckle and change the infants without asking Christie for her thoughts or opinions on anything. In a reification of her gendered position within society, Christie is only important as the dam and sustenance of the children. Her immanence is only broken through when a male authority figure says it has been.

The stifling effects of Christie’s gendered position as the immanent and ultimately inconsequential birthmother to the real miracles are clearly articulated in the dialogue of those who come to see the children. Although Christie is clearly visible and accessible to visitors, questions concerning the transcendent meaning behind the birth of the quintuplets are addressed to male members of the community such as pastors, local officials, and even the doctor who had assured her she was only having one child (Mason 178). Due to the men’s status as speculative and intellectual figures as opposed to women’s affective, emotion-based status, (Hollywood 8) everyone assumes that they will learn more about the circumstances behind and possible message of the births by talking to men associated with Christie.

In the context of a consideration of ideological apparatuses and gender identity, Judith Butler notes that the ability to communicate effectively is an important measure of power. Therefore, “in having a speech act silenced, one cannot effectively use the performative” (Butler 86). If one cannot communicate effectively through speech, then he/she runs the risk of being unable to preserve his/her position within the community. It is, then, disconcerting to note that immediately after Christie gives birth to the quintuplets, she loses her voice within the family unit. When Wad attempts to converse with Christie about the children, Alma—Wad’s sister—says, “Don’t make her talk. She needs her strength” (Mason 34). When Christie attempts to get Alma to go back to her own home later in chapter, Alma tells her to “hush and don’t think a thing about it” (Mason 37). Already, the women within the family are silencing Christie’s
speech acts, effectively undermining her ability to take on the performative aspects generally associated with mothers. Furthermore, since language connotes agency (Butler 7), Christie’s enforced silence strips away her ability to take an active part in making decisions concerning the children’s health and well-being. The silent mother, then, takes on the role of another child within the Wheeler family. She is to be coddled and commended for her accomplishment in carrying so many children to term, but she has lost the rhetorical power to shape either the way the family sees her children or the decisions they will make regarding them.

Although some people do take the time to converse with or even write letters to Christie, these individuals do not listen to her personal thoughts about her pregnancy and the newborn infants. Instead, much like the Wheeler family’s displacement of its sexual anxieties onto Christie’s physical person, strangers use her as a receptacle into which they can pour various traumas and anxieties, offering tales of infertility and “the bitter story of their dead children” (Mason 208). These people assume that as a woman who has encountered the presence of the Divine through a miraculous birth, Christie can help them mediate and understand their grief. In *Women, Music, and Faith in Central Appalachia*, Heather Ackley Bean draws from theologian Sheila D. Collins as she explains that Appalachian women often tell their personal stories of grief and hardship in order to name and discuss the God of their experience as opposed to the “‘God of an alien and imposed culture’” (25). The women writing to Christie, then, are attempting to enter into a dialogue concerning the nature of God and come to terms with their own loss. This practice allows them to account for radical suffering in a way that allows them to hope for liberation and salvation; in engaging Christie in this manner, though, the letter writers enact a type of emotional rape upon a young mother obsessed with preserving the lives of her own children. In their desire to account for their own suffering and discover a theodicy that accounts
for the death of innocent children, these anonymous individuals refuse to consider the possible negative effects of infecting Christie with such bitter, poisonous tales. Instead, they regard it as preordained that they find consolation in forcing their tales of misery and woe upon someone who they assume has a close, personal connection to the Almighty.

Even more troubling is the way in which a supposedly miraculous occurrence serves to deny Christie access to the modes of power traditionally associated with motherhood. While the community may regard the births as miraculous, the pragmatic Wheeler family sees the babies as an odd event that has physical and financial ramifications. Early on, both the Wheelers and Dr. Foote realize that Christie is physically unable to produce the amount of milk needed to keep five infants alive on her own—much less also manage to keep up with diaper changes, fretting children, etc. Therefore, multiple female members of the Wheeler family and neighboring farms are constantly on hand to assist in feeding, swaddling, and bathing the quintuplets. Although these women provide Christie with much-needed help, their constant presence gives Christie little chance to assert her rights and role as mother to the children. There is always another woman who believes she knows the best way to feed and handle the babies. In one scene, Christie is being assisted by Amanda and Mittens—an African American wet nurse who volunteers to help Christie—when the children start to cry. As Christie picks up and beings patting Emily Sue, sitting:

…on the edge of the bed with her.

“Hand her to me,” said Mittens. “And take this one here.”

The babies always seemed glad to drink from Mittens’ breasts. She bounced them so softly Christie thought it must feel to the babies like floating.
Amanda took John Wilburn from Mittens and burbled her baby talk at him. “You’re just a little froggy-boo, just a little froggy-boo!”

“They’ve been crying too much,” said Christie, peering into Emily Sue’s face. The little eyes seemed to whirl in confusion.

“They looking for they teeth,” said Mittens. “That’s why babies cry, ‘cause they ain’t got teeth.”

“That’s plumb crazy, Mittens,” Christie said affectionately.

“I never heard that,” said Amanda, setting down John Wilburn carefully and turning to touch Emily Sue. “Here, take this one. Her hungry. She took Emily Sue from Christie and gave her to Mittens.

As Mittens rocked Emily Sue, she hummed that familiar melody of hers. The baby quieted then and began to suck.

Christie walked around a crock of cream Alma had set on the hearth to clabber. On a cane-bottomed chair, a bowl of dough was rising. She reached for the key on top of the clock and began to wind the clock… (Mason 175)

Even though Christie’s breasts are heavy with milk and Mittens is already feeding John Wilburn, she and Amanda literally take the child from Christie’s arms so she can nurse. Not even given the privilege of holding the satiated John Wilburn, Christie demonstrates the lostness and powerlessness she feels by ambling around the room in search of something to do. Although Amanda and Mittens have both Christie’s and the infants’ best interests at heart, the manner in
which they decide who should hold what baby denies her the chance to assert her rights as the children’s mother. There is always another woman in the room who believes that she knows the best method of nurturing the children.

Christie’s tentative grasp as head of the domestic sphere is further threatened as Wad realizes the financial ramifications of the children’s birth and begins the process of assigning them a position within the family. Even though the women often view him as a comical figure, since Wad is the undisputed patriarch of the Wheelers, his thoughts and opinions shape the rest of the family’s decisions on any number of topics. His position, then, is one of uncontested power, giving him the perceived right to dictate each person’s position within the family unit. Judith Butler explains the influence of this type of uncontested power by using a medical example: “…The doctor who receives the child and pronounces—‘It’s a girl’—begins the long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girled” (49). Wad’s spoken pronouncements concerning the new babies, then, will forever influence how they are hailed and interpellated by the Wheelers as a whole.

Unfortunately for both Christie and the children, Wad’s pronouncement concerning the quintuplets denies them their humanity on the very first day of their lives. Upon first seeing the children, Wad chastises Christie for creating five more mouths to feed when what they really need is someone to help them plant, grow, and harvest that year’s tobacco crop and says that she “done dropped a litter, like a sow and a gang of little pigs,” (Mason 34-35). While these statements are Wad’s crude attempt at humor, they also force Christie to begin ceding control in caring for the children to the men in two manners. Just as the doctor in Butler’s example begins feminizing a child by announcing “It’s a girl!” Wad’s pronouncement of “It’s a pig!” starts the process of dehumanizing the quintuplets. This process is further carried out by his refusal to
learn their names, references to individual children as “that” and claiming that John Wilburn—who Christie believes looks like James—“don’t favor nobody” (Mason 181). By dehumanizing the infants in this manner, Wad turns them into caricatures of livestock and denies Christie’s status as a mother who knows how to best care for her children.

Secondly, Wad’s references to Christie and the children as a sow with her piglets turn them into an economic concern. Within farming communities, a sow and her piglets are a valuable resource that must be cared for and utilized appropriately. As Virginia Seitz acknowledges, women within many Appalachian communities occupy a gendered place within the economic system that is contingent upon their gendered position within the family unit (67). Within the Wheeler family, meanwhile, the women take care of hearth and home while the men make all economic decisions and care for the tobacco and livestock. Therefore, by referring to Christie’s children as livestock, Wad wrests control of the children’s well-being away from Christie and grants himself—as family patriarch—the right to use their fragile bodies for economic gain. Even though the domestic sphere is generally dominated by a woman, Wad has dismantled Christie’s right to make decisions regarding her home and family.

Wad’s remarks open the floodgates to complete male domination of the Wheeler domestic sphere. While the other Wheeler women and female friends of the family help Christie in the day-to-day tasks of feeding and changing the children, it is the men who charge themselves with making all the important decisions. For instance, Dr. Foote advises James to only keep two of the children and not let Christie feed the other three…an idea Christie and James refuse to accept (Mason 87). He also refuses to acknowledge Christie’s discomfort with him calling Minnie the ‘runt,’ handles the babies so roughly that they cry when he examines them and then expresses concern that they fuss too much, and issues advice on what steps
Christie should take next without listening to her observations or concerns (Mason 177-178). James also assumes that he knows more about caring for children than Christie does, criticizing her use of “cow’s milk [and] nigger milk” for causing the children to become sick despite Christie’s observations that a combination of too many guests and an opium-based syrup prescribed by Dr. Foote are what is making them weaker (185). When Christie refuses to accept James’s racist comments and defends having Mittens (an African American) help her nurse the babies, James responds so heatedly that she feels as if he blames her personally for their sickness.

The male domination of Christie and her home takes on a disturbingly militant note as Wad and other male representatives of the family begin literally guarding the door to the house and charging visitors ten cents apiece for the opportunity to see, hear, and touch the quintuplets. By this point, the children have literally become a way for the Wheeler family to reap financial gains. When Christie still expresses her opposition to the idea, Wad’s true reasons for charging admission become obvious. He lectures Christie on farming methods, stating,

It’s like anything. Take a crop. Corn or hogs, say. You save the nubbings and you save the stalks and the leaves and the seed. You feed the corn to the hogs. You put the manure back into the soil. You use ever smidgin of the hog—the tail, the ears, the lard, the snout, ever’thing but the squeal. And if you got five babies instead of one, you make them work for you. That’s the principle of thrift, and it’s in the Bible and you can’t set them aside on a silver platter and make out like they was better than the other chillern [sic] and don’t have to work or contribute to the family. And if people pay to see ‘em, then I say it’s like putting ‘em to work. Why even a mule can work. (Mason 177)
Upon hearing Wad’s speech, Christie feels “peculiar, as she always did when she overheard men talking business. This time she was the business” (Mason 177). Once Christie and the babies just become another piece of business—another commodity to be used for financial gain in the same way that the hogs, mules, and corn are—she effectively loses any lingering ability to make decisions concerning her children. Within the Wheeler family dynamic, Christies’ and the infants’ justification for existence is quickly shifting from one contingent upon her special relationship with God to one dependent upon her ability to make money for Wad. They are little more than human livestock that must submit to Wad and work in order to earn the right to continue living on the Wheeler farm.

Weak from giving birth and continually caring for so many infants, Christie does not have the physical stamina to stop the now carefully orchestrated public intrusions into her bedroom. Perhaps more importantly, since economic concerns are considered a man’s business and women are supposed to cede to the will of the male members of the household, Christie has no ground upon which she can stand in order to refuse to give in to Wad’s mandates. When Christie does attempt to get James to make Wad stop charging admission to her bedroom and kitchen, James reminds her that they owe Wad money and implies that it is his right as the patriarch of the family to collect on the debt as he sees fit (Mason 164). Christie’s perceived immanence and secondary status within the home has combined with Wad’s pragmatic decision to gain money by exploiting the religious fervor of others in order to create a bleak situation in which she has lost any opportunity to speak or act on her or her children’s behalf. As one by one the infants sicken and die from over-exposure to other people, she is physically, socially, and rhetorically powerless to save them. The competing standards of the typical gender identity
found within her family and the gender identity associated with religious mystics have served to kill her children.

Mason has the final infant—James Lake—die in the middle of the night with only Christie awake to notice his passing (247). Sadly enough, the passing of James Lake is one of the few instances in the book when Christie and any of her infants have a moment alone together. It is no coincidence that Christie does not wake her husband as her son spends his final few moments on Earth. Rural Appalachian women are often idealized as nurturers responsible for child-rearing, healthcare, tending to the family’s spiritual life, and providing for “all other domestic chores” (Bean 95). It is these responsibilities that have been systematically stripped away from Christie so that the Wheeler family can care for such a large influx of infants at once. Stripped of her maternal role and powerless to make the types of decisions that could have saved his life earlier on, she can at least sit “in the rocking chair, rocking in time with the pendulum of the clock and humming Mittens Dowdy’s tune under her breath…She held him until he was perfectly quiet and limp and his only movement came from the force of her own exhaled breath” (Mason 247). In this brief interlude, Christie is finally able to step into her expected gender role of nurturer. In rocking and humming to her son in his final few moments of life, she finally asserts her role as mother by allowing him to peacefully die in his sleep.

Christie’s actions immediately after James Lake’s passing leave little doubt as to who she first holds accountable for the loss of the children. After holding her dead child for several moments and quietly grieving, Christie wraps his body in an outing flannel “like a gift” and leaves his body on the pillow beside her sleeping husband (Mason 24). In this bleak moment, Christie blames her husband for not helping her protect their children. She is giving him the fruits of the men’s decision to deny Christie any role in making decisions pertaining to children
and force their infants to earn their place within the family. In presenting James with this “gift,” Christie acknowledges her own complicity in the entire matter. If she had found a way to stand up for the children’s rights more strongly and assert her autonomous nature within the Wheeler collective, she may have been able to save the lives of all five children. Instead, her desire to be accepted as a member of the group and willingness to grudgingly conform to Wad’s demands has helped bring about the death of her children. As the bearer and recipient of James Lake’s body, both parents are implicated in the loss of their children.

**Worshipping Feathers**

One would hope that the deaths of the quintuplets should lead James, Wad, and the community to see the error of their ways and provide Christie with the chance to finally assert her autonomy and authority within the family unit. Mason does not, however, create such an easy and satisfying ending. Instead, she spends another 200 pages following the tale through to its natural conclusion—demonstrating that within certain cultural contexts, even deceased babies can be read as miraculous signs and the mothers of such dead miracles can still be denied their voices. Even more tragically, religious ideology can be used by economically-motivated individuals to exploit dead children, and their mothers can continue to be denied an authoritative role within their societies and families.

The search for a spiritual message behind the quintuplets’ death starts within hours of James Lake’s death and comes from a somewhat surprising source—Amanda’s daughter Little Bunch. A tertiary character up to this moment, Little Bunch immediately runs over to the infants’ bed and starts tearing apart the bolster once she realizes that James Lake has died. It is
with a sense of triumph that she pulls two feather crowns$^1$ out of the lining (Mason 248). Upon seeing Little Bunch’s treasures, Amanda cries, “Feather crowns! I should have known” and Christie falls to the floor in bereavement (249). The subtext in this scene is that upon seeing the feather crowns that were in the children’s bed, Amanda, Christie, and Little Bunch all believe that the quintuplets were singled out to die from the very moment they were born. This knowledge catapults Christie back into believing that it is a combination of her sexual desire and her attendance of the revival that has caused all her pain. Just as she did when she was pregnant, she thinks that “her desire had reached out to that absurd, cavorting Brother Cornett, who prattled about the earthquake as though it were a grand show that would entertain them. She had not been faithful. The Lord punished her for her lack of faith, her doubts, her blasphemy. She accepted her sin” (Mason 252). The children have once again become the evidence of God’s condemnation of Christie. In the fashion of Bataille’s theories, she has been placed yet again into a type of suffocating religious anguish and rapture, animating what pleases her and leaving little doubt as to the fact that it is her own perceived inner failings that have cost her the lives of her children. She is once again gazing into Bataille’s mirror of ecstatic experience.$^2$

To an outside observer not familiar with the folklore surrounding feather crowns, Christie’s reaction to Little Bunch’s discovery may seem extreme—even self-aggrandizing. However, it is important to note that within ecstatic experience, “the Christian easily dramatizes life: he lives in the presence of Christ and this takes him outside of himself. Christ is the totality

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$^1$ Feather crowns are hardened, disk-like masses of feathers that have become somehow stuck or interwoven together. Traditionally, they are found within the pillows or other down-filled bedding of deceased people. Although there are competing opinions on the exact nature of feather crowns, common folklore in both Appalachia and other regions stresses that they are a sign that the recently deceased individual’s soul has gone to heaven and/or that the person was foreordained to die.

$^2$ Bataille’s mirror of ecstatic religious experience is referred to more thoroughly in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
of being, and yet he is, like the ‘lover’, personal, like the ‘lover’, desirable: and suddenly—torment agony death. The follower of Christ is led to torment. Has led himself to torment: not to some insignificant torment, but divine agony” (Bataille 51). Since Christie comes from a faith that privileges a highly personal relationship with the divine, it is natural for her to assume that the pain and burden of losing her children must be the result of divine censure. If she is to believe that the birth of the quintuplets was some sort of miracle, then she must read the feather crowns as revelation of her sinful nature; her agony and grief over the loss of her children is thus compounded by the knowledge that God used her babies to send her an extremely personal, emotion-based message concerning her lack of righteousness. At this moment, Christie is struggling with the belief that God has called the miracle-children back to him because she is morally unfit to raise them. Within the drama that is Christie’s life, the children have been sacrificed in order to help their mother acknowledge the error of her ways and purify herself. Therefore, she must continually play the entire pregnancy over and over again in her mind in an attempt to puzzle out, “why had they been born to her? Why had they been taken… If they were a sign of something, she thought, then their deaths did not necessarily mean the story was over” (268). Perhaps Christie still has a spiritual message to glean from their deaths.

Meanwhile, James and the surrounding community are also struggling with how to interpret the quintuplets’ deaths and seeking to find a message of hope within their short lives. Brother Jones preaches that “it was for the best” that God called the children back to heaven according to some mysterious, higher purpose (268). This sentiment is at least partially shared by Amanda, Christie’s mother, and James. James, in fact, believes that the births may be the sign that no one is meant to understand, calling the entire set of events a test that demonstrates how God, “‘wants us to trust in Him and stop trying to figure everything out…That was always
the trouble with you Christianna Wilburn…The way you ask questions,”” (269). James’s and Brother Jones’s assertions are echoed in modern-day mountain Baptist obituaries that include phrases explaining that only God knows why a loved one has died (Fairmount Church 19, 23, 24) and hearken back to Bean’s assertion within Appalachian theodicy, sickness and death are often read as a terrible yet necessary part of God’s good creation and plan for the future (176). From the perspective of James and Christie’s church, she should learn to accept that the children’s miraculous births and short lives are a part of God’s mysterious plan and move on with her life as a wife, mother, and member of the community. The children are construed as both an unfathomable sign of God’s wonder and potential stumbling block for people who are intensely focused on discovering the reasons/meaning behind their deaths. Therefore, Christie’s continuing pain and confusion months after James Lake’s death is considered unhealthy and unchristian, making her an immanent, weak, and possibly immoral person. In the eyes of the community, her grief and search for answers are just another extension of her gendered position as female mystic—a position that is losing its meaning since the justification for her status has died.

Ironically, even though Christie’s family and pastor believe that she should not continue to dwell upon the reasons behind the quintuplets deaths, they still think that she should continue to share her miraculous children with the world. To this end, Wad and others urge her to preserve the babies in a vacuum-sealed glass box and embark on a series of “educational lectures and diversions, for the purpose of educating the generally curious and concerned public about the Hopewell Quintuplets and the miraculous event that ended so unfortunately” (Mason 303-304). Brother Jones even refers to how a person should refrain from hiding their light under a basket (Mason 308). Christie is being compelled to one again become a religious icon that shares her
experience with the world without framing the experience in her own words or investigating the possible transcendent meanings behind it. Such a trip has the potential to reinvest her with the status accorded to a female mystic and has the added benefit of briefly whisking her away from the home that now fills her with sorrow.

As should be expected within the Wheeler family itself, money is once again the primary factor in deciding whether or not Christie and James should go on tour. Wad explains that with the $100 a week that Christie would receive in pay, she and James could “pay Blankenship and finish paying off what you owe me…I could settle up with the feed mill and what I owe my boys. Why you’re liable to come out ahead, the way they’re talking” (Mason 300). At this point Christie is being compelled by Wad to both stop focusing on her loss and to find an economic use for her suffering by giving people at county fairs and other events the chance to gawk at Christie, James, the miraculous babies, and the feather crowns. Just as Wad expected the children to contribute to the family coffers while they were alive, he views them as a valuable resource in their death; just like the hogs he described, Wad intends to use every part of the babies but the squeal. Indeed, according to Wad, Christie and James should be happy to have a chance to come out ahead—a statement that demonstrates just how little Wad prizes emotions when they are juxtaposed against the power of the almighty dollar. Thus, although the lecture tour gives her a chance to travel outside of her home and region, she maintains the same gendered position that she held while people were flocking to her home: she is still torn between the dual roles of feminine religious icon and a woman who is expected to submit to the economic mandates of the family patriarch.

Traveling the country in this manner does, however, appear tempting to Christie; it allows her to briefly suspend a portion of her grief by making her feel that she will have the
chance to hold others accountable for her children’s death. Bataille writes, “As long as he does battle, man is still neither comical nor tragic, and everything remains suspended in him” (91). It is a battle that Christie fully intends to wage on this “educational tour.” Mason writes that Christie has, “an urgent purpose—to get out there and face the public, to show them her pain. She wanted to get revenge on them, on people she didn’t even know. She thought her love for her babies would carry her through the coming weeks. She wasn’t going to let people forget them easily” (320). For Christie, this trip is about striking back at a society that—in Mason’s terms—wooed her children to death\(^3\) in order to experience something that transcended normal existence (328). As long as she can do battle with society and spew her vitriol onto the people who pay admission to gaze at her children’s bodies, she can keep some of her pain and suffering as well as the children’s memories suspended within her. Therefore, she is utilizing the trip as a way to keep from fully letting go of her babies and facing existence without them.

Predictably, Christie’s proclamations to the world about what it did to her children and her vows of vengeance fall upon deaf ears. Just as the men and women who came in droves to Christie’s home did not allow her to speak, most members of the crowds within the lecture halls and fair tents barely glance at or speak to the grieving parents. Instead, they rely upon the orations of Greenberry (the man who organizes the exploitative lecture series) to imbue feminine mystical experience with meaning. Therefore, the men and women point at and whisper about Christie but rarely speak to her—even when she talks directly to some of the individuals (Mason 328). James is also feminized and rendered speechless during Greenberry’s lectures. While the exact reasons behind James’s feminization remain unclear, it is probable that a combination of

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\(^3\) Wooling something to death means that a person has handled someone or something too much, bringing about death. This phrase is common within portions of Appalachia.
perceived class differences between the audiences and himself as well as the fact that he is on a
tour focusing on feminine forms of ecstatic experience cause the onlookers to see him as
immanent and emotional as compared to the transcendent and intellectual/speculative
Greenberry. In other, poorer communities, Christie notes that the audience seems too
embarrassed and ashamed to speak to them (Mason 340). Therefore, both James and Christie
must rely on the disreputable Greenberry to tell their narrative to the gawkers.

As Bataille notes, within mystical experiences, “it appears that no less a loss than death is
required for the flash of light to traverse and transfigure lackluster existence…I cease to be
anything more than a mirror of death, in the same way that the universe is the mirror of light.”
(122). The crowd members’ lackluster existence is being transfigured by seeing the physical
evidence of an exciting tale of strange birth and inevitable demise—not by listening to Christie
or James. Even Greenberry admits that Christie and James are only needed to make the drama
seem more real and believable (Mason 329). Far from being a spiritual icon, Christie is evidence
in a freak show; she is only there to prove that the quintuplets are real—that the dolls inside the
glass box are actually human beings—and that their loss was experienced by real people. It is
now the children’s titillating demise that people are really coming to hear about and worship.
Christie and James become the living mirrors of a death that fascinates both thrill seekers and
people attempting to make a spiritual connection with God. Only their gendered roles as the
biological mother and father of the children are important.

While few people may be listening to Christie’s assertion that her children were “wooled
to death…By people just like you” (328), her very articulation of this notion is a major step
forward for her. As Judith Butler notes, “A speech act can be an act without necessarily being an
efficacious act. If I utter a failed performative, that is, I make a command and no one hears or
obeys, I make a vow and there is no one to whom or before whom the vow might be made, I still perform an act” (17). Bean further claims:

A person healing from radical suffering is likely to reject any theology that treats human beings as objects rather than subjects, as pawns or puppets in the hands of an all-powerful God, for example—even a benign one. To be treated as a subject, a person, a real experiencing self is a crucial part of the healing process for those who have been objectified in their human relationships. (215)

No longer willing to accept the notion that God killed her babies as divine punishment or used the family as unwitting pawns in order to send an unclear message to the world, Christie rejects her position as objectified religious icon and claims her status as a real person. She has decided once and for all that the true culprits behind the loss of her children are those who decided that she and her children were a religious commodity that must be sold to and experienced by the world at large. This revelation leaves plenty of culpability to go around: the church, the Wheeler family, the crowds, and even Christie herself have all contributed to the babies’ demise. It was not God but a complicated mixture of religious rhetoric, gender distinctions, and economic factors that destroyed her family. In essence, she is attempting to break Bataille’s spiritual mirror that has up until this point reflected back what she and her society expected to see. She has become what Hollywood refers to as an “annihilated free, detached soul” (13), completely separated from the host of desires that once bound her. Therefore, while no one may listen or respond to Christie’s speech act, it has lasting consequences for her individual existence.

While this new Christie may seem colder and harsher than the Christie that existed before, her new way of seeing the world and her children’s place in it gives Christie the
opportunity to finally begin healing from her loss. Bean notes, “Healing from a violation is a process of reconfiguring one’s understanding of power relationships; ‘the power to speak to and about God, to and about the world in the light of the reality of God’ is ‘inseparable’ from the process of healing” (213). In order to truly grieve, Christie must reconfigure her understanding of power dynamics and the role of God within her life. It is only when this step is completed and Christie has explicitly defied the wishes of both the religious adherents clamoring that she must share her miracle and the fiscally-motivated people who wish to make money off of others’ faith (and who expect a woman to know her place in the decision-making process) by placing her children’s corpses in the special collection of a museum where they will remain hidden from the public that she can begin the lengthy healing process of moving on with her life.

The excess sexual, spiritual, and emotional passion that has dominated the book finally ebbs away as Christie takes a last glimpse of her children. While saying goodbye to them at the museum, “All her memories of the babies rushed forth—the live colicky milky bodies, exuding all their fluids, the heat in the bed…she and James were together again, saying goodbye to what their passion had brought forth” (Mason 415). In bidding farewell to “what their passion had brought forth” (415), Christie is doing more than releasing the infants from her grasp. She is also relinquishing hold of a mixture of the spiritual ecstasy, sexual uncertainty concerning pleasure, and strong desire to fit in that has influenced each and every decision she made concerning that nature of the children and their welfare. With everyone’s expectations left behind, Christie finally has room to acknowledge what she and James have actually lost: not miracles or money-makers but living, breathing children. As a newly annihilated and emptied being, she has begun the process of reshaping her thoughts, emotions, and actions to suit the God of her experience—not the God that everyone else demands she serve.
Since Christie’s new, fire-tested personality and her decision to place the children in a museum serve to further alienate her from both the Wheeler family and the Hopewell community, it could be argued that Mason’s novel does not leave much room for hope that religious and gender norms can be mediated in a successful manner. Such a pessimistic reading is further affirmed by Christie’s assertion that the experiences surrounding the quintuplets’ births and deaths caused her to lose her faith. Christie explains, “I could see deep into human nature right there. I saw those little babies die one by one, and I saw a world of people surrounding my bedside from the time my littluns [sic] was born, and even more of those people flocking around when we went on the trip, and I lost my faith” (Mason 451). Christie’s pain in this passage strikes a deep chord with readers who have undergone similar struggles of how to deal with the conflicting demands of faith, gender, and cultural norms within an individual’s identity. Simply put, Christie couldn’t provide a way to successfully negotiate between the conflicting roles and expectations she was attempting to fulfill. Her only way out was to reject expectations and lose her faith and her family in the process.

A type of hope may be found, however, in an elderly Christie’s advice to her granddaughter in 1963. After acknowledging her past and the troubled relationship she has had with her family, her god, and her community, Christie ends the book by saying, “I don’t aim to lie out my days all hunched up over memories. I want to watch the sun come up and hear a hen cackle over a new-laid egg and feel a kitten purr. And I want to see a flock of black-birds whirl over the field, making music. Things like that are absolutely new ever [sic] time they happen” (454). This passage indicates that although Christie has been forever changed by the pain in her past, she has survived and found a type of healing in the natural beauty of the world around her. Her final triumph resides in her ability to discover and accept who she is and find a place for
herself that does not rely on her conformity to socially acceptable roles. Instead, she finds peace and solace in a world notably devoid of social interaction.
CONCLUSION

Much as Mason’s *Feather Crowns* is a story full of pain, suffering, and ultimate loss, a type of healing takes place within the novel. While Mason’s heroine may not have notably changed the dynamics of her religious community, her physical community, or her family, she does change within her own body and mind. The novel’s message that such an internal change is even possible has positive ramifications for Appalachian and non-Appalachian readers alike who identify with Christie’s feelings of confusion, entrapment, and frustration within the novel. For such individuals, *Feather Crowns* demonstrates that there are cases in which it is impossible and damaging to try to force oneself to conform to conflicting gender and religious expectations. Thus, by creating a heroine who ultimately finds more strength in rejecting notions of a woman’s place within a good, Christian community than she does in learning how to live out her pre-established roles within it, Mason provides hope to Appalachians who are deeply wounded by their inability to conform to the gender and spiritual expectations of their homes, families, and communities.

Mason’s novel traverses important territory by calling into question the gender expectations of certain cultures and faiths in a way that is both challenging to and respectful of conservative religious ideologies like those found in Primitive Baptist and Holiness Pentecostal communities. As stated previously, many Appalachians tend to be wary of strict feminist approaches to social and cultural issues. By utilizing ecstatic religious narrative and discourse to address feminist concerns regarding women’s place within the family, the perceived immanence of women within both the church and society, Mason creates a safe environment in which readers can empathize with her characters and see the value in challenging long-held assumptions concerning gender norms and religious values. This narrative approach, then, may
be more effective in convincing certain specific Appalachian individuals to rethink the nature of and usefulness of strictly gendered roles within society.

*Feather Crowns* can do more than just help reshape Appalachian communities. By providing a historically-based novel that offers a sympathetic look at Appalachian characters’ struggles to come to terms with their identities and place within society, Mason challenges outside readers’ assumptions that Appalachians are a monochromatic and backward people. While the discourse Mason utilizes throughout the novel may be foreign to readers not brought up in overtly religious cultures, the oppressive structures that Christie and the other characters deal with and the emotional responses they engender are universal. When combined with the pathos with which she describes all of the characters—even Wad—in the text, these universal oppressive structures help readers identity with a people that has been depicted negatively by everyone from *The New York Times* to the University of Virginia’s now-defunct pep band. *Feather Crowns*, then, has the opportunity to establish connections between oppressed people in a variety of cultures and circumstances, opening the doors to intra- and intercultural dialogue concerning gender roles.

To characterize this book as demonstrating an essentially Appalachian experience, however, would be an immense oversimplification of the myriad conversations taking place in an entire region. The themes and plot of *Feather Crowns* are only one example of a variety of ways that religious and gender identity coalesce within Appalachia. While many Appalachians come from the faith structures described in this project, others come from more liberal or progressive homes. Still others come from different conservative environments and/or have no difficulty creating cohesion between their gender identity, religious identity, and desires. Therefore, more research needs to be done on this topic before a cohesive picture of this issue will emerge.
In the conclusion of “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith writes:

I only hope this essay is one way of breaking our silence and our isolation, of helping us to know each other.

Just as I did not know where to start, I am not sure how to end. I feel that I have tried to say too much and at the same time have left too much unsaid. What I want this essay to do is lead everyone who read it to examine everything that they have ever thought and believed about feminist culture and to ask themselves how their thoughts connect to the reality of Black women’s writing and lives. (2315, emphasis in the original)

As with Smith, I feel as if I have left too much unsaid. Every assumption about both gender identity, religious identity, and Appalachian culture needs to be examined and analyzed in order to truly transform cultural perceptions of what it means to be both American, non-normative and at the same time Appalachian. The reality of Appalachian women’s lives is too important a topic to be just glossed over by an essentialist CBS special report or off-color joke on The Tonight Show. They deserve to have their stories told in a truthful manner and heard across America. Works like Mason’s Feather Crowns may well represent an important step in getting both feminist and American culture to rethink its preconceived notions and learn to value the experiences and concerns of Appalachian women.
WORKS CITED


